Radio Big World

Saint Gennaro's Connection

A Garibaldian Tale

Joe & Frances Series

Blueprint for a Graphic Novel
We Describe You See

From an original idea by
Francesca Lenzi and Francesca Verbasi

RADIO BIG WORLD

Saint Gennaro's Connection

A Garibaldian Tale - The Joe & Frances Series

RADIO BIG WORLD APS

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1

Act 1 — Anger and deception in the Far East

Scene 1

At dawn, Duncan opens his eyes. The explosion that had struck him was devastating, but it hadn't come from the bomb he was meant to detonate to reignite his extinguished fuse. The device still lies on the ground, unexploded. Just a few meters before reaching his target, he had stumbled into a hole—at the very moment a group of Chinese nationalist rebels launched a fiery, dynamite-laced attack. It was the shockwave from the Chinese bombs that had knocked him unconscious. Soon after is awakening the rebels find him beneath a heap of ashes, half-covered in earth. Duncan is terribly burned, but still alive. Recognizing him as English, they take him prisoner and transport him to the Taiping headquarters in Nanjing.

The rebels are the Taiping, or "Worshippers of God," a religious sect founded nearly twenty years earlier by Hong Xiuquan, who proclaims himself the younger brother of Jesus Christ and *Tianwang*, the "Heavenly King." The Taiping follow a unique religious doctrine that blends elements of Christianity with traditional Chinese beliefs, preaching egalitarianism, monotheism, and the restoration of China's prestige and sovereignty. According to the Taiping, the corrupt ruling Qing dynasty—whom they refer to as the Jurchen, or steppe Mongols, and therefore foreigners—is driving the Celestial Empire to ruin. They believe that God has entrusted them with the mission of overthrowing the Qing and returning China to its former glory. Behind both the religious and political doctrines of Hong Xiuquan lies the true mastermind of the rebellion: Father Corso da Tirli, an Italian Jesuit missionary from a small mountain village in the Apennines near Florence. A devoted scholar of military strategy, a polyglot, a refined diplomat, and—like many Jesuits—a gifted performer and a master of disguise.

Scene 2

Father Corso was personally commissioned by the Superior General of his order to attempt the subversion of pagan China and bring it under the protective wing of Christianity. The Society of Jesus had been present in China for nearly three centuries: its members, under various Han dynasties, had served as mandarins, astronomers, engineers, scholars, and tireless missionaries. Always present at the imperial court and on excellent terms with the Chinese elite, the Jesuits had enjoyed decades of unrestricted freedom in their evangelizing

mission across the Chinese subcontinent. After the fall of the Ming and the rise of the Qing dynasty—of Mongol origin and hailing from Manchuria—little changed until the accession of Emperor Daoguang in 1820. Concerned about growing Western interference in Chinese affairs, the new emperor resolved to expel all Europeans from Chinese soil and eradicate their influence. He expelled the Jesuits from the Forbidden City, began dismantling their missions, and persecuted the converts. At that point, the Pope himself ordered the Society to intervene and halt the emperor's de-Christianizing campaign. The mission was entrusted to Father Corso, who, after many years in the country, fluent in the language and well-versed in local customs, was the ideal man to carry out the papal mandate.

Scene 3

When he is entrusted with the mission, Father Corso is in Rome, assessing the threat posed by Piedmontese ambitions on the Italian Peninsula and studying the Holy See's countermeasures. But on orders from his superiors, he departs aboard the first sailing ship bound for the Indies and arrives in China in 1850. In short order, he finds his puppet — Hong Xiuquan, a Chinese Christian preacher with a delirious vision and a large following — and together they found the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace, or Taiping in Chinese, which for nearly nine years has been a major thorn in the side of Manchu internal politics. The movement controls vast swaths of territory, including the province of Jiangsu, whose capital, Nanjing, has become the Taiping headquarters.

Scene 4

Duncan is taken into Father Corso's house, as he is the only one who speaks the wounded man's language—and, more importantly, he is also a physician and pharmacologist. The Jesuit disinfects and bandages the man's burns, administers herbal remedies to lower his fever, and keeps vigil through the night to prevent the symptoms of infection from worsening. One night, in a delirious state, Duncan begins to speak incoherently about an officer. Father Corso pays little attention but notes down the name anyway: the prisoner serves a far more strategic purpose. Father Corso knows that once the Emperor signs peace with the English, he will ask them to join forces to crush the internal rebellion and defeat the Taiping—thus rendering Corso's mission a failure. Therefore, the prisoner could be useful for gathering intelligence on the British army: troop numbers, weaponry, commanders, strategies. English soldiers are known for their reluctance to betray the Empire, so once Duncan recovers, he would be tortured and mistreated until every useful piece of information was extracted. Only then would his fate be decided.

A few days later, a messenger arrives in Nanjing bearing news from the Taiping spies scattered throughout Beijing. The Emperor had flown into a rage upon learning that his personal tea plantation had been destroyed during the battle in which Duncan had taken part. In retaliation, he ordered the execution of the chief imperial gardener—a mandarin—who had failed to save even a single seed of that rare tea during the looting of the

Forbidden City a few weeks earlier. At least Father Corso now has one piece of good news to report to the Apostolic Nuncio in Macao, who awaits him for a status report on the unfolding situation.

Scene 5

Father Corso sets out immediately for Shanghai, and from there reaches the Portuguese colony. Troubled by the grim news he carries, the Jesuit arrives at the Apostolic Palace only to be met with far more bitter revelations. The Nuncio informs him that in Italy, the English and the Freemasons are preparing an expedition to conquer the ultra catholic Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and they intend to entrust command of the operation to Giuseppe Garibaldi. Fiercely anti-clerical, Garibaldi would, after taking Naples, march on Rome to overthrow the papacy. There is no longer any way to stop them: the British government has already appointed a plenipotentiary in the person of General Styles, who has tasked his son Joe with acting as liaison in Sicily to prepare the landing and facilitate Garibaldi's military operations. A detailed dossier has been compiled on him, thanks to intelligence gathered by the Society of Jesus in both London and Sicily—a copy of which is handed to Father Corso. At that moment, the priest recalls having heard that name before. It is the very one mumbled by the burned prisoner in a feverish delirium. During the few days he remains in Macao, in a Franciscan residence overlooking the ruins of St. Paul's Cathedral—once one of the Jesuit glories in Asia before the Society was temporarily dissolved and expelled even from there—Father Corso devises a plan to secure both the success

of the Taiping rebellion and the salvation of Rome. After days and nights of meticulous planning, before taking his leave of the Nuncio, the Jesuit presents a detailed report outlining the various phases of the operation he has conceived—its boldness striking the Holy See's diplomat. The Nuncio immediately instructs his secretary to transmit it to the Vatican and, via diplomatic pouch, to send a packet to Piazza del Gesù with instructions for Corso's fellow Jesuits in Italy. He bids Father Corso farewell, filled with expectation and hope.

Scene 6

During the return voyage, aboard the junk cutting through the waters of the South China Sea, Father Corso reviews his plan. With Hong Xiuquan leading the Taiping troops, disaster is all but guaranteed. As long as the fighting remained between Chinese factions, he had proven competent—but now, faced with a modern, well-equipped European army, the situation changes entirely. What the Taiping forces need is a great leader and strategist, someone accustomed to commanding irregular troops yet capable of confronting Western armies—someone like Garibaldi. Father Corso would therefore travel to Sicily and sabotage Garibaldi's expedition. At that point, abandoned by the English and the Piedmontese and hunted by the Bourbons, Garibaldi would gladly accept the escape route offered to him. Thus, the Taiping would gain a general with a real chance of wresting Beijing from the Imperial forces—and with Garibaldi in Asia, the conquest of Rome by the Italians would never take place, least of all at the hands of anti-clerical Freemasons.

The key to his plan is "fermentum ghibellinensis", or "iro-

caine"—an alkaloid discovered and renamed by Father Corso himself. It is easy to isolate and extracted from the flowers of an ornamental plant known as Jìngmiàn cǎo, literally "Mirror Grass," which is widespread in southern China but unknown in Europe. The plant has broad, rounded leaves and, according to Father Corso, belongs to the Urticaceae family. It is recognized in Chinese pharmacopoeia for the potent psychoactive effects of its inflorescences and is used, in very small quantities, to treat certain ailments and discomforts. In studying it through the lens of Western pharmacology, Father Corso uncovered several particularly intriguing properties—chief among them, that once a certain dosage threshold is crossed, irocaine induces dramatic shifts in mood, heightening euphoria and stimulating aggression. Father Corso administers it to the Taiping forces, diluted in alcohol before each battle, to make them more effective fighters. A significant part of the rebellion's military success can be attributed to this drug. However, the substance has serious side effects: when given in higher doses, it distorts perception, induces delusions of omnipotence, and triggers homicidal rage. Father Corso dares not use it on his own men, fearing senseless massacres or violence against peasants and civilians in Taiping-controlled territories.

It would be a different matter with the Garibaldians. By distributing it in heavy doses—mixed into wine or spirits—they would succumb to looting and murder against the Sicilian population, turning public opinion, both Italian and international, against them. Intoxicated and increasingly dependent on the substance, the Garibaldiians would soon begin killing one another, leading to the complete collapse of Garibaldi's campaign, even from a military standpoint. At that point, Garibaldi would have no escape: vilified, denounced, hunted—

he would have no choice but to accept the invitation to fight in Asia. The keystone of Father Corso's plan would be the British Legion, whose members are already deplorable in his eyes, being heretics and Protestants. They would receive the highest doses of irocaine and thus become the most violent. The reputation of their gruesome and tragic actions would spread even to Asia, and perhaps the Manchu Emperor would think twice before asking the English to intervene on his soil.

Scene 7

Once Duncan's burns have been thoroughly treated and his life is no longer in danger, he is transferred to prison. He spends his days in a cell so cramped he cannot even lie down. He relieves himself in that same confined space, without being given the chance to bathe or change into clean clothes. He is left for long hours without food or water, except for a tiny, maddening droplet that falls rhythmically onto his head. Since the bandages were removed, he has never seen himself in a mirror. But when he dares to lower his gaze, he observes the skin of his body now deformed and covered in massive scars. To the touch, his skin feels like that of an amphibian. His voice has become hoarse and deep, as his vocal cords were partially burned and irreparably damaged in the explosion. An eternity seems to pass before someone finally comes to retrieve him from his damp cell and bring him before Father Corso—the man he had glimpsed only in flashes between bouts of delirium. He is washed, dressed, and made presentable for the first time since those humiliating days of captivity.

Scene 8

Father Corso introduces himself and asks for his name. The man refuses to reveal it, replying that his friends and fellow soldiers call him Duncan. From now on, that would be his only name. Father Corso doesn't press the matter; he has no need for the man's past identity. What interests him is the man Duncan might become—not who he once was. Before beginning their conversation, Father Corso casually invites him to sit and help himself to the food laid out on a nearby table, prepared for the occasion. As Duncan eats ravenously, he remarks that he can tell Father Corso is Italian from the accent in his English. The Jesuit confirms this, then launches into a dazzling display of English accents: from London cockney to the slang of Liverpool fishermen, from the aristocratic tones of the royal court to the bourgeois inflections of the City. Impressed by the performance, Duncan confesses that he studied Italian at military academy, though he was never much of a linguist—his Italian, he admits, is rather poor. At this, Father Corso smiles inwardly with quiet satisfaction.

In the meantime, Father Corso hands him a mirror, inviting him to look at himself as a new man. What Duncan sees is a face rendered unrecognisable, deformed and partly eaten away by the flames. "My life is over," he tells him, for in England a man so disfigured either ends up as a fairground freak or is destined to beg in the alleys of London. He might as well die. Father Corso has already foreseen that reaction, so from a small flask he offers him a sip of aquavit and urges him to take heart. After a while, Duncan loses consciousness, and when he wakes he finds himself back in his cell. Duncan feels a strange anger rising

inside him, and a mounting fury keeps him restless throughout the night. The next day, Father Corso visits him in prison and finds him rather weak. He promises that he will improve the conditions of his detention and that, once he has regained his strength, he will take him out into the countryside for some walks in the open air. After days of better food and clean water, Duncan is ready to go out with the priest. Father Corso hands him a cloak with a wide hood so as not to disturb passers-by with his swollen, disfigured face, and they leave. On that first walk, the Jesuit speaks to him about how English officers — all nobles or wealthy gentlemen — see their soldiers as wretches and treat them accordingly. Father Corso tells him that during his absence he went to Canton to speak with the English Command to inform them that Duncan was still alive and well, and how the generals had mocked him, saying that a maimed, half-scarred soldier is of no use to either the Queen or the Empire, and that they could keep him. Meanwhile, he continues to offer him the usual flask of aquavit, from which Duncan drinks in large gulps. His fury is even greater that night. Duncan spends it sleepless, punching the wall and cursing England. Every day, Father Corso comes to fetch Duncan, and together they go out. Their daily walk repeats itself in the same pattern for weeks, though in different places and at different times. The priest has him accompany him to the market, the harbour, the temple, and in every setting, with a paternal voice, he urges Duncan to reflect on how English merchants are enriching themselves at his expense after sending him to war and abandoning him; on how medals have been handed out to the higher ranks while the true heroes — the common soldiers — have been forgotten; and on how disastrous his condition is, since a life of vagrancy awaits him despite having fought heroically for his country. Meanwhile,

the flask in which the Jesuit dilutes the irocaine continues to empty. Day by day, the conditions of Duncan's imprisonment improve. First a larger cell, then a bed, then more food served at regular intervals, and finally access to the washrooms and clothes that smell of fresh laundry. Yet Duncan's mood keeps worsening: he curses the English, the Army, the Empire; he plots to kill Queen Victoria as soon as he returns home; he fantasises about placing a bomb under Parliament; he even begins to brood over personal revenge against everyone who has ever wronged him. Father Corso observes the prisoner closely through a special opening in the vault of his cell, invisible from below. The Jesuit is satisfied with how the subject is reacting to the administration of irocaine.

One morning, the jailers wake Duncan at dawn and escort him to Father Corso. The priest informs him that he is free to go. The Taiping will provide him with clothes and a few coins, but after that he will have to fend for himself — keeping in mind, however, that the English encampments are far away and the roads are filled with scattered Chinese soldiers, armed and starving, trying to make their way back to their villages. Reaching a port where European ships are anchored will not be easy, and in such a state they would certainly not let him board, nor even approach. Duncan recognises the flask on the Jesuit's desk and takes a long swallow from it. He feels lost, abandoned, at the mercy of fate. Exhausted by what life has dealt him — and continues to deal him — he feels a powerful desire to die. Once he has waited for the liquid to take effect, Father Corso speaks the name Joe Styles. In Duncan's eyes he sees the reaction he has always hoped for: that unmistakable glint that signals a deep feeling of hatred and a thirst for revenge. Drunk on violence, Duncan tells the priest about the night of the

explosion, and immediately Father Corso, twisting the narrative, points out that perhaps Styles only pretended to go and reignite the bomb, while in reality he wanted someone else to do it in his place so he could take the credit. In short, for medals, honours, and promotion, Styles had no qualms about sending his men to the slaughter. Father Corso lets a few seconds of silence pass before adding further lies about Joe — namely, that the Queen herself decorated him and showered him with gold. Styles has thus been able to leave the army, which he never truly cared about, and move to Italy to enjoy the comfortable life of a wealthy gentleman. Rage flares across Duncan's face, and he begins kicking the furniture and the walls. The Jesuit does not stop feeding that anger, telling him that Styles is now recruiting unsuspecting English commoners to make them fight in a war that benefits the usual rich merchants and that, without a doubt, he would sacrifice them — just as he did in China — in some suicidal venture to obtain recognition, favours, and far more money. The fury in the Englishman's heart becomes blind. Duncan feels it rising inside him, ready to burst like a river in flood. He tells himself he is willing to pay any price to get his hands on anyone who played even the smallest role in condemning him to this new life as a disfigured man — let alone Styles, who is the chief architect of his misfortunes. After he has calmed down, Father Corso asks him whether, instead of returning to Europe, he might be interested in staying in China with him. He would be given a command role, he would fight alongside the Taiping for the triumph of Christianity in the East, and if they succeeded in taking Beijing, he would live in luxury and comfort for the rest of his days: land, palaces, servants, concubines. A flash of hope appears in Duncan's eyes: at last someone is offering him a concrete chance at life rather than

inevitable social death. He is about to speak, but Father Corso anticipates him. Before being admitted into the Taiping ranks, he will have to prove loyalty to the cause, courage, and skill in combat. To test these qualities, Father Corso will put him to the test. Since Duncan also speaks a little Italian, he will go to Sicily with him, and together they will stop that damned Joe Styles before returning to China to Christianise the Celestial Empire.

A French ship ready to sail back to Marseille awaits Father Corso a few days later at the port of Shanghai. The Jesuit travels with a large trunk loaded as "quinine for the treatment of malarial fevers." With him are two Taiping — trusted men and among the best warriors of the organisation — whom he will present as his seminarians, and Duncan, in the guise of a missionary priest, travelling wrapped in a long black habit and covered by a wide, dark hood. His name, from now on, will be Brother Richie, in echo of Matteo Ricci, one of the greatest Jesuit missionaries in China. To prevent Duncan's face from being accidentally revealed and frightening those around him, Father Corso teaches him how to apply makeup to make himself more presentable and less monstrous.

2

Act 2 - Sicily's calling

Prologue

It is 21 March 1860, and a horse, ridden by an Englishman in civilian clothes, gallops swiftly along the road from Marsala back to Trapani, heading toward the castle of Erice, which dominates the city from the heights above. The Englishman crosses the countryside, where many bent-over peasants work in the fields. He rides past the sea, watching fishermen bustling with their nets, and finally enters the town, crowded with customers and vendors. The man smiles, thinking that all these people are unaware that in a few weeks their reality will change radically: Garibaldi is about to land in Sicily.

The English on the island, like many of their compatriots back home, have largely supported and financed Garibaldi's enterprise. The wealthiest among them meet in secret to receive news and updates from various exponents of Freemasonry, charged as an organisation with softening up the Bourbon

commanders: every battle fought in Sicily, without anyone noticing British intervention, will be arranged in such a way that the Garibaldians emerge victorious without much hesitation, and the Bourbons are defeated without great losses. From those battles, the myth of Garibaldi will emerge strengthened, glorious, and invincible. As a hero, he arouses such interest among the English that he fills newspapers and conversations throughout the empire. Moreover, Garibaldi is a brother Mason.

Scene 1

Joe Styles, son of Commander Edward Styles, is a young soldier determined to serve his nation's flag and proud of the opportunity he has to fight for his country. His father is, in fact, a British Army general who distinguished himself in the Crimean War through his charisma and successful strategic decisions. Upon his return to England with a medal for valour, Prime Minister Lord Palmerston commissions him to act as the government's representative at the Admiralty for Garibaldi's affairs in Italy and as president-in-chief of the task force overseeing British intervention. General Styles is somewhat astonished by this interference in Italian matters, but Lord Palmerston assures him that the smooth progress of the bearded Italian general's enterprise is in Britain's best interests.

While his father leaves for Crimea in 1856, Joe departs for the Second China War — later known as the Second Opium War — with the rank of lieutenant. The theatre of operations is in eastern China. Following the Franco-British victory in October 1859, Joe, already promoted to captain, receives the Second China War Medal for his heroic and enthusiastic participation

in the British triumphs at the three battles of the Taku Forts. It is thanks in part to him that the United Kingdom secures significant new concessions from the Celestial Empire: the legalization of the opium trade, its expansion through the use of cheap local labour, guaranteed free access for British merchants throughout China, and the abolition of taxes on the import of foreign goods. Joe knows nothing of this, but he is proud to have contributed to what British newspapers call the "new golden age" of the British Empire after the victory.

Scene 2

It is during the conquest of Beijing that Joe's life changes. While the sacking of the Forbidden City — the crowning act of European military triumph in that war — is underway, Joe enters a pavilion where he finds a trembling Mandarin crouched in a corner. The official, who knows the real reason why the British began the conflict — their insatiable passion for tea, which had nearly bankrupted them — offers him, in somewhat stentorian English, seeds of *Da Hong Pao*, a very rare oolong tea grown only on the Emperor's estates near the Taku Forts, in exchange for his life. The Mandarin explains that the forts have less a strategic function than a surveillance one, for that plantation is the only one of its kind in all China. It is guarded day and night by an entire fortress of soldiers because it is the rarest and therefore the most precious tea in the world. Joe accepts the offer and spares the Mandarin, for if the man's words are true, the value of that small bag of seeds is incalculable.

A few days after the sacking, the commander sends Joe and his battalion to the front to fight the third battle of the Taku Forts, the final act of the war. During the most difficult phase of the siege, the commander asks Joe to improvise a diversionary manoeuvre to disorient the Chinese defenders. Joe, explaining the value and sacredness those plants hold for the Chinese, proposes burning the imperial tea plantation. He is convinced that as soon as the defenders see the plantation in flames, they will rush out of the fortresses, loosening their defensive lines and allowing the British to break through with ease. The commander approves the plan, assigning Joe a team of volunteers the night before the attack. Theirs is a suicide mission which, if carried out successfully, will allow the British to take the fortresses and save many lives.

The soldiers face a desperate task: they must slip through tight Chinese surveillance in complete darkness, guided only by small oil lanterns, place the incendiary charge, and light the fuse. Around dawn, after reaching their position and setting off the trigger, the long fuse goes out when it is only a few metres from the device. Meanwhile, the faint English lantern lights alert the fortress sentries, and the commando hears shouted orders and bursts of gunfire from the walls. Second Lieutenant Charles Duncan, Joe's best friend and comrade from military college, leaps toward the bomb, intending to ignite it directly with the flame of his lantern. Joe, who had planned to make the gesture himself, fails to stop him in time. The bomb explodes; the Chinese fall into chaos, and the British troops attack and take the Taku fortresses.

Torn apart by the explosion or gunned down by musket volleys from the fortress, not only Duncan but many of his fellow soldiers lose their lives in that mission. Only Joe and a few other

fortunate men manage to escape. Without their courage and spirit of sacrifice, His Majesty's army would never have won the third battle of the Taku Forts.

Joe, who commanded the squadron, is showered with glory and decorated for his success. Yet no enthusiasm colours his soul, for in his heart he knows that the real heroes are Duncan and his men — those who followed him despite everything and sacrificed themselves for the mission's success. Plagued by remorse and guilt over his friend's death, and violently shaken by the fury of the fighting, Joe takes a leave of absence, which he spends wandering through dive bars and Chinese taverns. After a few weeks drifting around the ports of China, unable to shake off the weight pressing on him, he petitions through his father for a temporary suspension of his service and receives a provisional discharge.

After returning home, Joe describes his malaise to his father. Edward, a veteran, tells him that it is normal to feel as he does: it is always like this when a close friend and comrade-in-arms dies, no matter what rank one holds. Hoping to keep him occupied and away from the battlefield, his father proposes that Joe travel to Sicily to recruit Garibaldi volunteers for the British Legion. Since Joe had chosen Italian as his second language at military college, going to Italy would also allow him to put that knowledge into practice. With Garibaldi's landing, the Legion's militia would join Joe on the long march to Naples, and he would return to fight. Edward's hope is that, once the seizure of the Two Sicilies is over, Joe will come back and attempt a career in the ranks of His Majesty's Army.

Scene 3

In January 1860, Joe arrives in Sicily under his father's leadership to enlist the British residents on the island and to wait on the shore at Marsala, just below Erice, to facilitate Garibaldi's landing. Meanwhile, in England, Garibaldian committees are organising the main expeditionary force of the British Legion, which will leave London on the same day Garibaldi departs from Quarto. The departure is scheduled for an unspecified day in the following May.

Joe resides in Erice, a small town perched on the hills overlooking Trapani. One of the most noble and powerful Sicilian families — sympathetic to Garibaldi and his cause — owns the Castle of Venus, where Joe stays as a guest. The family's untouchable status shields him from the scrutiny of the Bourbon police. Yet Joe must still go undercover whenever he moves about, so as not to arouse suspicion. Most of the Englishmen in Sicily who might be interested in enlisting are involved in shipping and maritime trade, which requires some plausible justification for Joe's presence in the ports of Trapani or Palermo. He disguises his activity by posing as an official of the Monroy Company, an English shipping firm that has recently opened several branches in Sicily, including in Trapani and Palermo.

However, his work becomes more intense at night than during the day. It is then that Garibaldi's secret command post — a series of underground chambers in the park of the Castle of Erice, carved out of an ancient Roman cistern — comes alive. A passageway opens beneath the Statue of Venus, providing access. The dense network of tunnels that criss-cross the subsoil

of Erice also connects to the cistern, allowing one to travel as far as Trapani without ever seeing daylight.

In these underground passages, Joe meets British landowners and businessmen, mediating their demands and acting as guarantor for the protection of their interests during the coming regime change. He also listens to the various members of the local Masonic lodges — English and otherwise — who report on secret negotiations with Bourbon commanders and officials. Finally, he studies the plans of the Bourbon coastal defences and consults topographical maps of the coastline to better organise the landing.

Above all, the cistern stores uniforms, weapons, and ammunition for the British Legion, as well as for those who will join Garibaldi along the way. The supplies arrive from England on Monroy ships, packed in crates destined for the Castle of Erice and therefore untouchable for any customs officer. Officially, Joe and the company's porters are responsible for transporting the crates to the castle on large wagons, and — owing to the castle's importance — a squad of Bourbon soldiers even escorts the convoys out of the city.

Scene 4

Sir William Monroy arrives in Erice on 21 March 1860. Monroy is a wealthy tea merchant and owner of the eponymous shipping company, based in London but with trading offices in China, India, and Egypt.

He was one of the financiers behind the two British wars in the Far East, the most recent of which had ended only the year before. As a co-financier, victory entitled him to war

reparations, allowing him to stop paying Chinese taxes on tea and to purchase it at a far lower price. In truth, the so-called Opium Wars were in fact wars over tea. At first, only China produced it, but once the British discovered tea in the mid-1700s, they became its greatest consumers in less than a century. The Chinese sold tea exclusively in exchange for silver ingots — a system that threatened to drain the British Empire's reserves, for even all its silver mines together would not have sufficed to meet the ever-growing domestic demand. To lighten their trade balance, the British had already begun, at the end of the eighteenth century, to smuggle opium grown in India into China and exchange it for tea. Although illegal in the Chinese Empire, opium was widely used there for both recreational and medicinal purposes. The Chinese therefore found the British proposal attractive: substituting silver with opium in exchange for large consignments of tea. In fact, the recreational use of opium had spread in China thanks to the Portuguese, who had introduced it together with tobacco in the mid-seventeenth century — around the same time the English began consuming tea en masse. The amount of Portuguese opium that managed to slip past imperial controls had been minimal. But with the arrival of the British, the drug flooded the Chinese market, leading to widespread addiction. In a short time, the streets of China became filled with derelicts willing to do anything to obtain the substance, and deaths were counted in the thousands each day. In 1839, faced with such an enormous social and health emergency, the Emperor banned opium and its trade — and in response found himself at war with the British. Fifteen years later, when the imperial court again refused to fully legalise opium, the British and the French answered by sacking the imperial palace. Monroy had co-financed those military expeditions because, in the event

of victory, he would not only enjoy substantial tax exemptions but, above all, gain access to the tea plant and its seeds, which he intended to cultivate on his estates in India and on the island of Ceylon. The operation would allow him to cut production and shipping costs dramatically, increasing his profit margins. China had jealously guarded the secret of the plant to maintain its monopoly on tea, preventing its seeds from being exported or even sold to foreigners. After obtaining seeds and specimens of the tea plant as spoils of war, Monroy became one of the first to recreate plantations on his estates in the Indian subcontinent. Despite the potential economic damage to his trade, he remains steadfast in his opposition to the production and marketing of opium, citing its devastating effects on those who consume it and the ease with which entire nations can become dependent on it.

Monroy travels from England to Erice, establishing trading offices and purchasing warehouses in Sicily's ports in preparation for the opening of the Suez Canal a few years later, when a vast number of ships will pass through it. The project he is cultivating is to become the first importer of tea into the Ottoman Empire — a realm that consumes tea perhaps even more than England and stretches all around Sicily, from Morocco to Albania. Achieving this would make him one of the richest men in the empire.

Moreover, thanks to his daughter Frances's passion for botany, Monroy discovered that the tea plant is none other than a camellia — so much so that European botanists named it *Camellia sinensis*, the Chinese camellia. This is also one of the reasons he is on the island: to attempt the production of tea on the Old Continent. Since Sicily is the Mediterranean region with the most favourable climate for growing camellias, if he succeeds in planting enough specimens and getting them to take

root, he will become Europe's first and only tea producer. Should he accomplish this daring botanical feat, he will undoubtedly gain entry into the Royal Society of London, opening the way to glory and celebrity.

Scene 5

A carriage stops in front of the main entrance to the Castle of Venus in Erice, dropping off Sir Monroy and his daughter, Miss Frances, accompanied by her former wet nurse and now lady-in-waiting, Miss Schmidt. The two are in stark contrast to each other. One is young and beautiful, full of grace and gentle manners; the other, of German origin, had been carefully chosen both for her outward appearance — that of a large ogre — and for the impression she gave of being an unyielding, rigid, rule-abiding person. Her outward appearance, however, says little about what Frances actually is: a woman of character, rebellious at times in her responses or in her refusal to follow the canons imposed by society. Strong in her independence, Miss Frances is convinced she does not need a man. In fact, despite her father's numerous attempts to marry her off, she has rejected every suitor. Many, drawn by her beauty, have asked her father for her hand, but none has ever managed to make her heart beat as she wishes. The love she dreams of and aspires to goes beyond trade and beyond the opportunistic demands of a society without moral values. Her romantic, naïve, and perhaps idealistic desire to preserve herself for true love has led her to clash with her father more than once. However, their last argument has left her with no choice. Frances must marry the Baron, the owner of the castle — the perfect example

of the kind of man she does not want in her life, yet the one she is now expected to have by her side forever. She detests the air of condescension — and at times disgust — that the Baron assumes whenever he addresses his subordinates, which is practically everyone, and she detests even more the fact that she cannot hold a single conversation with him that does not revolve around himself. The man has never been interested in anyone's feelings; he lives to boast of his titles and flaunt his possessions, and every person with whom he deals serves him solely and exclusively as a means to his own ends. All his ambitions are directed toward acquiring greater power, greater notoriety, and greater wealth. Educated from an early age to be feared, the Baron is almost entirely anaffective and prone to violent outbursts of anger whenever something fails to go according to his plans.

This time, however, there is nothing she can do. Sir Monroy has been adamant: despite her pleas and harsh words, her father has told her in no uncertain terms that the marriage is necessary — both for the family business and for Frances herself. First, the Baron holds significant influence in Sicily, and conducting business on the island requires his approval. Moreover, he owns land in Erice which, thanks to its climate and terroir, is the ideal place to begin cultivating *Camellia sinensis*. Is she not also eager to succeed in establishing the first tea plantation on the Old Continent? Recrimination serves no purpose. Frances clutches Miss Schmidt's arm, flashes a broad smile, and sets off to meet the landlord, who is waiting for them together with his two trusted men and the assembled servants.

Scene 6

Baron Alfonso Ruggero Vincenzo di Sant'Anna, whom everyone refers to simply as *the Baron*, is the eldest son of one of Sicily's noblest families. The Santa Ana — as they were originally called — arrived in Sicily from Spain during the war undertaken by Charles of Bourbon to wrest southern Italy from the Austrians. His great-great-grandfather, Diego Carrillo de Santa Ana, served as Viceroy of Sicily from Charles's accession to the island's throne in 1734 until the king became sovereign of Spain in 1759. Before bidding farewell to his Italian subjects and leaving the kingdom to his son Ferdinand — who would be crowned as Ferdinand I of the Two Sicilies — the king bestowed extensive gifts upon the nobles who had followed him to Italy. To Viceroy Santa Ana, who already owned the Castle of Erice, having seized it from its previous Austrian proprietors expelled after the Spanish victory, Charles of Bourbon granted various noble titles tied to lands and properties, but above all the title of *Baron of the Kingdom*. It was an exceedingly rare honour: no one in Sicily possessed it, and even in Spain only a handful of families held it. It was quite a triumph for Diego Carrillo, who, though of noble lineage, belonged only to a cadet branch of the far more illustrious Santa Ana of Seville and therefore bore no proper title of his own. The Baron's great-grandfather, Carlo Vittorio, was a military man who held the post of Lieutenant of Naples — the second highest office in the kingdom — for many years, while his grandfather, Lucio Maria, an admiral, served as chief of staff of the Bourbon navy and later as ambassador to the Spanish court. His father, Gabriele Ippolito, was born in Madrid and raised not on the Sant'Anna estates in Sicily

but in the royal palace of Naples. In the Neapolitan capital he learned numerous foreign languages and developed a passion for international law. His skills as a conversationalist and as a capable mediator between opposing parties naturally propelled him toward a diplomatic career. After numerous sojourns in European capitals, he returned to Naples, where he became diplomatic adviser to King Ferdinand, father of the current ruler of the Two Sicilies — a role of even greater weight than that of the foreign minister.

Today's Baron, upon his father's death, takes his place at the helm of the family and assumes responsibility for managing the Sant'Anna family's immense land and real-estate holdings. The succession also grants him the position of Governor of Trapani, yet he currently harbours no further political ambitions. If asked, King Francis — whom the Baron has known personally since boyhood — would immediately grant him the title of Viceroy of Sicily and the right to reside in the royal palace in Palermo. But the title is more an honour than a political mandate, and he would bear all the expenses of maintaining the court as well as the full costs of representation.

The Baron detests the ancient and anachronistic protocol of court ceremonials. His father had forced him, as a child, to attend the long and pompous ceremonies in Palermo and Naples, and after years of being compelled to participate in countless public and religious events, he no longer wishes to attend them as an adult — nor to contribute financially to their organisation. He must also consider the significant expenses associated with holding an official and honorary position at court as a Sicilian nobleman. Given the current circumstances, any deeper involvement in politics would quickly lead to the dynasty's

downfall, primarily because of the substantial costs involved and his absence from the management of the family's wealth. In fact, the Baron's father may have left a great impression of himself in the courts of half of Europe, but the family budgets have suffered heavily.

At the age of sixteen, while accompanying his father on several state trips to England, the Baron discovered a more dynamic nobility, a more modern and rational agriculture, and an economy and business culture based on maximum productivity at minimum cost. In other words, he discovered a system of productive management free from the unnecessary and burdensome semi-feudal trappings typical of the traditional *ancien régime* mentality that still dominated the Italian ruling classes, except for a few in Piedmont. Either the Sicilian and Neapolitan nobility — as well as the aristocracy of Rome, Florence, and Venice — would adapt to those more modern models, or they would end up on the breadline. It was precisely that northern European economic and organisational paradigm he intended to follow when his turn came to manage the family fortune. But to assimilate it fully, he needed to master English and delve into the most modern publications on economy, agriculture, industry, and transport. Moreover, he had to experience Britain firsthand in order to absorb that way of negotiating, doing business, producing, and becoming wealthy. The Baron's father, through the Neapolitan ambassador in London, arranged for him to stay as an au pair with the Monroy family in Windsor. The Monroys were not strictly noble, but they were wealthy and highly skilled businessmen on a vertiginous rise. The Baron, who already possessed a basic understanding of English thanks to his father's hopes for a diplomatic future for him, refined

his linguistic skills — both social and commercial — under Monroy's guidance. Immersed in that environment, he quickly learned the capitalist methods of management and production applied to commerce and agriculture. During the five years of his English sojourn, the Baron develops a certain camaraderie with one of the Monroys' sons, who is the same age as he is. The two bond over adolescent experiences and ambitions, but they are fundamentally of different temperaments: both aim at money as a means, but Monroy seeks fame, while the Baron seeks power.

Almost thirty years later, in 1859, the Baron receives a letter from Monroy announcing his arrival in Trapani. At the government palace, he welcomes his former companion from youthful exploits, who has meanwhile become Sir Monroy. The English friend is visiting Sicily with his daughters. When the Baron meets them, he is struck by the beauty of the youngest of the three and decides he will do everything in his power to marry her. In their first conversation, Monroy informs him of the recent developments in the tea trade following the British victory in China and outlines his plans connected to the forthcoming inauguration of the Suez Canal. The Baron immediately understands that Monroy's intuition is potentially a winning one and decides to support it, inviting him to stay at his castle. On the other hand, the only way for Monroy to carry out his plans is to have the Baron on his side, for as one of the wealthiest and most influential men on the island, he can guarantee loyal workers, compliant civil servants, virtually no risk of theft or fraud, and the swift granting of permits and concessions. Monroy therefore accepts at once when the Baron asks, in exchange for his protection, to enter as a minority partner in the venture.

While Monroy and the Baron enjoy one of their business chats at the castle, Frances appears with news for her father: the land of Erice is ideal for growing camellias, and numerous terraces have the perfect sun exposure, humidity, and microclimate for them to thrive. Monroy then explains to the Baron the story of *Camellia sinensis*. The Baron observes the fervour with which his friend speaks about the subject and recognises what has always been Monroy's weakness: the pursuit of glory. He takes advantage of this and makes his proposal. Monroy will be allowed to plant tea on his estates — even though the Baron risks making a fool of himself before the entire European nobility — but in return he must grant him Frances's hand. Monroy readily agrees to give his daughter in marriage to a rich, influential nobleman and business partner; the problem will be convincing his daughter, who has rejected every suitor up to that point.

After a few weeks in Erice, Monroy and his daughter leave Italy. Frances still does not know about the arranged marriage, and her father takes his time to persuade her once they are back in England. In agreement with the Baron, he will bring Frances back to Erice the following year, a few months before the wedding, to finalise the arrangements and supervise the expansion of his business's Sicilian branch.

In a letter to the Baron at the end of December 1859, Monroy confirms that the Sicilian nobleman and Frances will marry and celebrate their union the following summer or autumn. He has managed to convince her. However, Frances insists on a crucial requirement for her marriage and relocation to Sicily. A large, modern, cast-iron-and-glass greenhouse for her camellias must be erected in the park of the Castle of Erice. It is one of the modern modular, assemblable greenhouses produced in England — and not just any greenhouse, but the very one

that now stands in their Windsor residence, which Frances personally designed to make it suitable for growing camellias. The structure will be disassembled by Monroy's gardeners, and the various components will arrive in Trapani and Palermo on Monroy's ships. Along with the disassembled greenhouse, Joe, a young man, will arrive to oversee the reassembly work. The Baron, in a telegram, replies that everything is acceptable and that he awaits their arrival. For Joe, assembling the greenhouse will be a fairly simple task. It is certainly more complicated to set up a military camp while on a mission. The British expeditionary force has repeatedly selected his company to handle the logistics of their movements in China, and Joe has always managed to establish camp on time. Meanwhile, hidden inside the crates of greenhouse components, the weapons, ammunition, and uniforms of the Garibaldians will also arrive. Joe, with the Baron's approval, will store them in the castle vaults. Immediately after Joe's arrival in Sicily, the Baron assures him that no public official in Trapani would ever dare to search the coffers destined for the city's governor, so Joe can carry out his work quietly. However, the Baron warns him that if he acts foolishly and risks detection, he will claim complete ignorance of the Garibaldi plot and behave as though he has noticed nothing. The Baron would come out clean, whereas Joe would end up on the gallows.

Monroy would have liked to entrust the greenhouse work to Edward, his head gardener, who has known Frances since she was a child and helped her design and build the greenhouse in question. But a few weeks earlier, Monroy is contacted directly by the Admiralty. As a major shipowner with one foot already in Sicily, the Lord High Admiral, Rupert Sterpinton, asks him — on behalf of His Majesty and in defence of British interests — to put

his organisation at their disposal to get a government agent, in disguise, to Sicily and to provide him with cover. Monroy agrees to shelter the Admiralty agent on the condition that the man takes responsibility for assembling his daughter's greenhouse, scheduled for completion by the following spring. Sterpinton has no difficulty accepting this request. The Admiralty co-opted Monroy because he largely finances the British Legion, which has its headquarters in London, and because he makes its contacts and ships available to supply Garibaldi with weapons and uniforms. Monroy is fully aware that a change of regime in Italy — and above all in Sicily — is necessary to realise his business plans. Not only Monroy but many other English businessmen have interests on the island. Like him, they work to promote a political transition in Italy that will favour their ventures. Only with Garibaldi at the head of a liberation army can the change desired by the British be realised. No European government officially supports Garibaldi's feat, portraying it instead as a spontaneous revolutionary enterprise by a people who legitimately overthrow their sovereigns to determine their own destiny. Under international law, therefore, no nation can challenge the handover of the Two Sicilies. These British entrepreneurs aim to accelerate the new course of Italian history by providing financial and military support to the Garibaldians, as well as bribing Bourbon officers to ease the General's passage without excessive fighting. Garibaldi, after conquering the Two Sicilies, will hand the kingdom over to King Victor Emmanuel of Savoy, bringing the entire peninsula under the aegis of the Piedmontese, the most modernised and pro-British Italians. The Piedmontese will not only refrain from obstructing British companies and entrepreneurs; they will actively favour them, acting as genuine business angels of Garibaldi's exploits. This

view is largely shared by the Baron, who, as a Freemason, works for the success of Garibaldi's enterprise — though his motivations differ from those of his childhood friend.

Ever since his time in England, the Baron has been aware of the enormous profits generated by the opium trade. He also knows its social effects, having visited the Chinese slum smokehouses along the Thames in person. He is now a partner in an English shipping company with bases in China and India, where opium is plentiful and cheap. After Garibaldi's success, the Piedmontese will owe him for overthrowing the Bourbons, so he will remain Sicily's most powerful man and one of Italy's most respected aristocrats. As a result, no customs officer of the new Kingdom of Italy will dare to inspect Monroy's ships, which are then also his. Unbeknownst to his future father-in-law, if the Baron succeeds in smuggling opium out of China together with tea, he will be able to establish smokeshops throughout the peninsula — as has already happened in London or Canton — while keeping the Two Sicilies free of them. The opening of the Suez Canal will ensure the drug's availability and low price, allowing it to spread widely in every northern Italian city. A unified Italy, without the many controls and customs of the defunct Italian states, will allow a more fluid and free circulation of goods — even illegal ones. In about ten years, when the substance is widely used and many Italians are addicted, the Baron plans to organise a counter-Expedition of the Thousand, using his tea-trade dividends and drug-traffic profits to finance it. This time, a thousand Sicilians loyal to him will land in the north, near whichever city is then the capital of Italy — Turin, Florence, Rome, or another. While his counter-conquest is underway, his agents on the continent will recruit officers and soldiers of the former Bourbon army discharged by the Piedmontese.

Supplied by the Baron with brand-new weapons, they will march overland to the capital under the Bourbons' insignia. If the coup succeeds, the Baron will depose the House of Savoy and force it into exile in the name of the Bourbons. He will then hand over the Kingdom of Italy to the Bourbon royal family, who, having directly conquered a second kingdom, will be able to bear the imperial title, and he will be appointed chancellor for life. Thus the Empire of the Three Sicilies will be born, with equal dignity to those of Austria and Prussia, and he will be its head of government, like Metternich or Bismarck. The Baron will be remembered as one of the most astute statesmen of all time. The only problem he still has to solve is how to procure opium in China without Monroy's knowledge. But he will take care of that in due course.

As the guests disembark from the carriage, the Baron cordially shakes hands with Monroy, kisses Frances's hand, and is introduced to Miss Schmidt. He asks how the voyage went and why it took them an extra day to arrive. Monroy explains that the ship had a broken compass, which caused the delay. The Sicilian nobleman welcomes them to the Castle of Venus and introduces them to John "the Maltese", his head of security, and Mr Carminati, his administrator and financial manager. Both men speak English.

Scene 7

John the Maltese, known as Giovannino, is born in Malta in 1822, the son of a fisherman and a fishwife. At the time of his birth, the island has been under British rule only since 1815, after the Congress of Vienna, and so, given the short time that

has elapsed, the British have not yet settled permanently on the island. Growing up between the harbour and the fish market, he dreams of boarding one of the huge sailing ships that arrive at Valletta's anchorage every day. They come and go laden with treasures, and their sailors, in the taverns, tell tales of faraway places. Giovannino imagines returning one day as captain of one of those ships. His family, however, is poor and cannot afford to educate him. The best schooling available to him is the Presbyterian Sunday school, established only a few years earlier, where he begins to familiarise himself with the English language, still spoken by very few in Malta. Despite being a willing and gifted student, he must abandon his studies after a few years to go fishing with his father at night and help his mother at the market in the morning. To embark as a non-commissioned officer and begin the long career at sea that leads to the rank of captain, he needs to read and write fluently and to learn geometry and arithmetic — knowledge beyond his reach, as he cannot afford books or a teacher.

Frustrated and worn out from adapting to that life, John runs away from home in 1836 and clandestinely embarks on a ship bound for Egypt. However, at the port of Alexandria, the authorities discover and arrest him. Since the ship is flying the British flag, the harbour master sentences him to forced embarkation on a British gunboat, where he remains for four years, sailing the Mediterranean to escort British convoys. In his few spare moments, a companion in misfortune — a disgraced former primary-school teacher — teaches him to read and write English and instructs him in Euclidean geometry and basic arithmetic. John proves a talented pupil. When he is finally landed back in Malta, he finds himself with a criminal record and without a job to support himself. Although he has grown

strong and nearly two metres tall, no one is willing to employ him because of his own and his family's bad reputation. His father had been a gambler and, at his death, left enormous debts on the shoulders of his wife, who, reduced to abject poverty, died of grief while her son was still at sea.

His knowledge of English, however, becomes useful when he comes across an announcement for the opening of the island's first gambling house: a club of London aristocrats has opened a branch in Valletta and set up a casino reserved for members and their guests. The management seeks strong men with military experience and a proper command of English to serve as security guards inside and outside the establishment. John applies and is hired; they dress him, give him accommodation, and put him to work. A former British cavalry officer trains the new recruits in hand-to-hand combat and self-defence, while a retired steward of a noble household instructs them in etiquette and the protocols to observe with titled guests.

A few years after beginning his employment at the casino, John starts a relationship with Helene, an Irish girl who works as a coat-check attendant. He ends up falling madly in love with her; together they dream of leaving the island and building a better future elsewhere, perhaps in America. Helene, thanks to that job, has managed to escape the severe famine that, shortly after her arrival in Malta, devastates her country and her family. Only her brother survives; he emigrates to America and now lives on a farm in the new territories the United States is colonising in the West. He writes to her often, urging her to join him, and through his letters John and Helene begin to imagine a new life overseas. Their plan is to save enough money to join Helene's brother and buy a ranch where they can finally be free and happy. They are so enthusiastic about the idea that they even discuss it with

friends and colleagues. Their relationship and their work at the casino go well until 1848, when Europe descends into chaos as revolutionary uprisings ignite Sicily and then spread across Italy, France, and much of the continent. In September, the Austrian Count Bruno Messernich, imperial plenipotentiary for Italian affairs, is in Malta, holidaying with an English nobleman friend of his and a frequent visitor to the casino. Messernich had led the Austrian delegation that forced Piedmont to sign the surrender and return Lombardy to the Empire after the disastrous defeat at Custoza and the fall of Milan. The security of Messernich and his companion inside the club is entrusted to John.

Paolo Carminati, a young student and Lombard nationalist seeking revenge for the deaths of the Five Days of Milan, manages to disembark in Malta inconspicuously and spy on the diplomat's movements. Punctual as Austrians are, the count passes by the club every evening at the same time, dines with his friend, and plays a few hands of cards before returning home. Once his plan is finalised, Carminati checks out of his hotel, leaves a generous tip for the concierge, and announces his departure for Livorno that evening. He sends his luggage to the port, pulls a hood over his head to conceal his identity, and makes his way to the casino. As soon as Messernich's carriage arrives and the two noblemen step out, the Lombard, hiding in a nearby alley, covers his face, emerges from his hiding place, draws a gun, and begins firing wildly. Standing in the plaza in front of the clubhouse, John immediately tries to shield the noblemen by throwing himself over them, but he is forced to take cover to avoid being shot himself. He draws his own weapon and returns fire until the attacker runs out of bullets. Carminati then throws

his gun to the ground and sprints into the maze of alleys in the old city, desperate for an escape route. John steps out, takes aim, and fires. He tries to hit the gunman in the head, but the shot misses. He realises, however, that he has wounded the attacker in the palm of his left hand; as the man keeps running, he begins to clutch the bleeding hand against his chest. John sets off in pursuit and plunges into the alleys of Valletta. He loses sight of the fugitive almost immediately in the narrow streets and dark passageways, but follows the trail of blood the assailant leaves behind. After another series of alleyways, however, the trail suddenly disappears, as if the man had vanished into thin air. John searches for a long time, even questioning passersby, but no one seems to have seen him. Empty-handed, he returns to the casino to assess the situation. In the excitement of the moment, he had not paid attention to the fate of the two aristocrats. He discovers that Messernich and the British nobleman were struck by bullets and collapsed at the first shot. They are not the only victims. Helene, felled by a stray round, lies lifeless on the casino steps; she had come out to welcome the honoured guests and take their cloaks.

Scene 8

Carminati had left Milan with no intention of killing Messernich. He was not even thinking of going to Malta. More simply, he had fled to Sicily to escape Austrian repression after the First War for Italian Independence ended badly for Piedmont and Milan. He had become a Milanese resistance leader because of his courage and determination on the barricades. An Austrian arrest warrant hung over him, as it did over many other rebels,

almost certainly promising immediate execution. He chooses to take refuge in Sicily because, since January, the island has been in revolt, has declared the Bourbon monarchy forfeited, and has proclaimed the Kingdom of Sicily. For strategic reasons, the port of the island's capital admits only cargo ships loaded with supplies or food. Passenger ferries — potential carriers of spies or saboteurs — are diverted to other harbours. With Palermo closed to passengers, he arrives in Trapani, intending to join the rebels and place himself at the disposal of the new constitutional government. The Baron, as governor of the city, has been notified of his arrival by the Ministry of the Interior in Naples. In the capital, they have received a memo from the Bourbon consulate in Milan warning the authorities that Carminati is a troublemaker and a dangerous disturber of public order. The report describes him as a Milanese insurgent involved in the Five Days of Milan uprising and therefore a figure to be monitored closely.

Despite Sicily's declaration of independence, the Baron, as a nobleman and member of the Bourbon elite, and as a high magistrate with a political-administrative role, remains officially loyal to the Bourbons. Consequently, the government in Naples, regardless of the revolt, continues to interact with him as if nothing has happened in Sicily. On the other hand, the Baron and his family cannot withdraw from the events inflaming the island. By long tradition, the Sant'Anna family sits by right in the Sicilian Senate, even though in previous centuries it had been only a pro forma institution without decision-making powers. Therefore, when the Sicilian parliament is resurrected to become a serious legislative body on the English model, the Sant'Anna family's rightful seat is confirmed. This had already happened in 1821, after the island's first independence uprisings, and again

in 1848. In that second legislature, unlike most senators, the Baron, in order to keep up appearances before the government in Naples, votes against the decision of the Sicilian executive led by Ruggero Settimo to give the crown of the kingdom to a prince of the House of Savoy. He knows, however, that his vote carries no real weight in the situation. Reliable sources inform him that Ferdinand Maria, the Savoy prince-designate, will refuse the crown because of his involvement in the war against the Austrians, which ultimately leads to the Italians' defeat. With no other candidates available, the Baron begins to consider claiming the throne of Sicily for himself. He therefore sounds out the mood at the Court of Naples and realises that King Ferdinand is not averse to leaving Sicily to its fate, provided it ends up in friendly hands — such as those of the Baron. His Minister of Finance has repeatedly warned him that, since 1821, the Sicilians, in retaliation against the Neapolitans and the government in Naples, have been reluctant to pay taxes and comply with fiscal laws, to the point that the island has become a chasm absorbing a large portion of the state budget, without the kingdom having benefited economically for years. With the sovereign's consent effectively in his pocket, the game seems won for the Baron. As the richest and most influential man in Sicily, it would not be difficult for him to obtain — or purchase — the votes of the island's parliament and secure his election as sovereign. The entire political landscape appears ready for his ascent, and the Baron's ambitions begin to align with the possibility of a Sicilian crown within his grasp. But in April 1848, a few days before Carminati's arrival in Sicily, Messernich goes to Ferdinand to urge him to use a heavy hand against the Sicilians. The Austrian convinces King Ferdinand to abandon the idea of an independent Sicily, arguing that it

would set a dangerous precedent for all European kingdoms struggling to repress independence and nationalist revolts. The count insists that Ferdinand take immediate action. And in fact, shortly afterwards, the Baron and the other governors who have remained loyal to the crown receive word that a military reconquest expedition is being prepared and will depart in a few months, in the summer. The Baron's royal plans collapse because of Messernich, and the Baron swears to make him pay dearly for it.

Two men in civilian clothes stop Carminati at the quay in the port of Trapani, where his ship docks. Very politely, they ask him to follow them, making it clear that there is no alternative. They escort him to the port gendarmerie, where they show him the international arrest warrant issued by the Austrian authorities. The gendarmerie reports the situation to the Baron who, since receiving the dispatch from Naples, is torn between two options: arresting and detaining Carminati as the Neapolitan government orders, or ingratiating himself with the new government of the island, which would find in Carminati a capable popular leader. Uncertain about his next move, the Baron opts to detain the man from Milan for a few days. In any case, this decision preserves his reputation as governor and protector of public order, both in the eyes of the Bourbons and of the people of Trapani. The public security agents take Carminati to the Central Prisons in Via San Francesco and lock him in a single cell. During mealtimes at the canteen, which usually serves an indistinguishable slop, Carminati sits alone at a table and, in a strong Milanese inflection, complains loudly about the food, making derogatory remarks about Sicilian cuisine and Sicilians. After a few days, a Sicilian prisoner of enormous stature approaches Carminati's table with a bowl

full of boiling water. Four or five other inmates follow him, pinning the Milanese man in place. The big man pulls himself out and urinates into the bowl. Then, taunting him about the "delicacies" of Sicilian cuisine, he tries to force Carminati to open his mouth and swallow the boiling liquid. Carminati, however, jerks free and with a kick throws the steaming mixture into the man's face. In the confusion, he breaks loose from his assailants' grip and begins to strike back. Brave and merciless, he batters his opponents one by one while a furious brawl erupts among the other inmates, plunging the prison into chaos. The guards fail to restore order and are forced to call for reinforcements. The Baron then sends in the town militia, which, using clubs and rifle butts, manages to calm the situation. Carminati is dragged away and put in solitary confinement. The Trapani Court indicts him and decides to bring him to trial for the brawl that claims the lives of four inmates and a prison guard. The prisons teem with informants working for both the judicial authorities and the Baron, and they agree unanimously that Carminati is a formidable fighter. The Baron, intrigued by the rumours, decides to meet him in person, and as a result takes charge of the trial. It is a prerogative of the city's governor to do so, and this time it is justified by the fact that Carminati is not a subject of the kingdom; judging him therefore falls to someone of higher rank and responsibility than a simple local magistrate. So they take Carminati out of prison, wash him, dress him in clean convict clothes, and bring him before the Baron acting as investigating judge. The interrogation about the brawl lasts only a short time, while the conversation between the two continues at length. The Baron is amazed at the boy's culture and manners. A student of economics from a good family, Carminati, fluent in English

and French, can speak about music as well as politics, literature as well as capital markets, with a command of language and a breadth of knowledge that are genuinely rare. Yet some of his responses regarding Italy and the current revolutions reveal his potential for violence and brawling. Fanatical in his patriotic idealism, he is ready for anything to see the society he imagines brought into being: parliamentary, modern, industrial, Italian, and possibly with Milan as its capital. The Baron decides to take the young man from Milan under his wing. This crazy patriot might prove extremely useful, and the Baron senses that shaping him could become an asset in his larger designs. The sentence is magnanimous: three years at hard labour instead of the gallows. The mild verdict, should anyone ask for an explanation, has solid justifications. The Baron will tell the Sicilian revolutionary government that he pardons a patriot who might one day prove useful to the cause. To the Bourbon government, he will reply that he wishes to punish him but not eliminate him, so as to hand him back to the Austrians. But the Baron knows that no one will ask him to account for his decision. In Palermo, everyone thinks only about how to defend themselves against the Neapolitans, and in Naples they worry only about how to defeat the Sicilians. Nobody cares about the criminal verdicts of a provincial court. Carminati's sentenced labour consists of resurfacing and maintaining roads. The city of Trapani has already opened a series of building sites to renovate the road to Erice, which is also the road leading to the Baron's castle. This allows the nobleman to keep the prisoner under close observation and to retrieve him easily if necessary; all he needs to do is stage an escape. If required, it is certainly more credible for a prisoner to escape while outside than while locked inside a prison.

Scene 9

A few months go by, during which Carminati seems to toe the line, even though he remains sharp-tongued and must therefore be kept separate from the other prisoners. Then one of the Baron's informers, who frequents English circles on the island, brings news to the castle: in September, Messernich will be the guest of a British nobleman residing in Malta and therefore within reach. In fact, after the Austrian diplomat's exploits in Naples that ruined his plan, the Baron has instructed his network of contacts to report any information about Messernich's movements, especially if he comes to Sicily. Naturally, he has not explained why he needs this intelligence: the Baron is determined to have Messernich assassinated, but he must do so in a way that does not reveal him as the instigator. Carminati, in this, is the right man: Milanese, condemned by the Austrians, a fugitive from Milan where he has fought and been defeated by Austria, a patriot embittered by the disastrous outcome of the Milanese uprising — he has a thousand reasons to attempt Messernich's life. If Carminati is discovered or killed, his reputation as a turbulent patriot makes him the perfect culprit, and no one will look further for a connection to the Baron. If he succeeds, however, the Baron intends to keep him in his service. The young man has brains; he has sound ideas on economics and business management; he is educated and polyglot. For the goals the Baron has in mind, Carminati is the ideal person to take charge of the Sant'Anna family's business affairs.

One morning, just outside the prison, as the convicts march toward the construction site, Carminati notices that his chains are strangely loose. The guard has clearly tightened the chains

incorrectly, and the picket does not seem to be made up of particularly intelligent men. However, Paolo lacks the courage to flee immediately, knowing that in a city like Trapani he would be captured again in no time. As he tries to imagine an escape route, he sees a procession of carriages passing in front of the prisoners' line, and the picket leader orders everyone to stop. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Carminati notices a passerby signalling to him. At first he ignores the stranger, but then he realises the man is flailing to get his attention. "Flee! Flee!" he seems to mouth, and with gestures he urges him to follow. At that moment, a firecracker explodes near one of the carriages passing in front of the line of prisoners. The horses bolt, chaos erupts, and Carminati breaks free from his chains, running toward the man who is urging him on. Together they vanish down a side street, disappearing into an open doorway. The man asks Carminati to follow him upstairs. They enter a flat, deserted for the moment, where a supposed Carbonari barrack has been set up: tricolour flags, portraits of Murat, a map of Italy drawn as a single state, revolutionary books, patriotic slogans. The man identifies himself as the club's president. He and his members have organised the entire escape: the loose chains, the platoon of dummies, the carriage procession, the firecrackers. Slowly, the others return to the flat, having completed their tasks and pleased with the success of the operation. The members of the so-called Carbonari club reveal to Carminati that they have freed him because they have a mission for him: to kill Count Bruno Messernich. At the mere mention of the name, Carminati's face lights up with rage; he declares himself ready to do anything to avenge the insult he and the Austrians inflicted on Milan. They inform him that the count is now in Malta, where he will spend about a month on holiday. The patriots will provide

him with clothes, fake Tuscan documents to hide his identity, and a bundle of franc and sterling banknotes; they will give him the address of a hotel where a room is already booked in his name, and they will leave him a letter of introduction for a restaurateur who, besides food, will supply the weapon for the attack. Once on the island, Carminati will have almost the whole of September to prepare his plan before Messernich, in early October, leaves Malta for Vienna. After the attack, they will pick him up and bring him back to Sicily. Carminati does not hesitate and accepts. After spending some time in the flat and gathering as much preliminary information as possible about Malta and its geography, he embarks for the island under the name Ferruccio Sileni of Lucca. What he does not know is that the "Carbonari" who rescued him and commissioned the attack are actually the Baron's accomplices, who, properly instructed, have staged the club's existence inside one of the Sant'Anna family's many Trapani properties. Eager for freedom and inflamed by patriotism, Carminati has been swept away and falls into the trap, unaware and not even suspecting who stands behind everything that has happened to him so far.

Scene 10

After the attack, Carminati, desperate and unsure of his next move, sprints toward the harbour, clutching his injured hand. At a certain point, as he passes under an archway, he sees a fishing net fall on him from above, enveloping him and bringing him down. He has no time even to cry out from the pain in his hand: a cloth soaked in chloroform is pressed over his mouth, and he loses consciousness. A group of men dressed as fishermen load

the bundle wrapped in the net and walk undisturbed toward a fishing boat moored only a few steps away.

Carminati wakes up in a white bed, wearing a dressing gown, his injured hand bandaged. The temperature is warm, and the windows of the room are lancet — or rather polylobed — typical of Arab architecture, like the perforated grille that screens them. But where is he? His luggage from Malta lies at the foot of the bed. An Italian gentleman enters the room and asks how he feels, how his hand is. He explains that he is a doctor, and that Carminati is in a room of his clinic in Tunis. A group of men brought him there unconscious and injured, and they paid for his stay. For Carminati, everything makes sense: the Carbonari picked him up in Malta and took him to the most Italian city in the Mediterranean outside Italy. Carminati asks if he can leave, but the doctor refuses, prescribing a further period of rest.

A few days later, the Baron himself appears in Carminati's hospital room, declaring that the Milanese is officially an escapee from the Bourbon prisons and is now on the radar of all European police forces, who believe he is responsible for the attack on Messernich. One word from the Baron to the right people, and Carminati would end up on the gallows. The Baron therefore holds the power of life and death over him. Carminati asks how the assassination attempt went, and the Baron tells him that Messernich and the other man are dead. He adds that his men from the city militia raided the patriots' club and arrested the Carbonari, who confessed everything. However, being a patriot himself — or so he claims — he condemned them only to light punishment and, recognising the service Carminati has rendered to the Italian cause, decided to give the young Milanese another chance. In reality, the murderer of the Austrian count is indeed wanted throughout Europe, but

the search is for unknown persons: no one in Malta saw the assassin's face, and the Maltese authorities have not linked the fake Lucchese tourist to the shooting. The fake Carbonari watched over Carminati throughout his stay in Malta to erase any trace of him, and on the evening of the attack one of them boarded the steamer to Livorno, buying a ticket in the name of Ferruccio Sileni. His cover therefore remains intact.

The Baron offers Carminati the chance to enter his service and take charge of the general accounting and economic management of the Sant'Anna commercial enterprises, which he plans to expand over the next two decades. Like all the great families of the kingdom, the Sant'Anna household maintains a representative office in Naples to handle general accounting and relations with the tax authorities, the judiciary, and the banks — an office that Carminati would run. At the moment, the Baron must commute to the capital because he has not yet found anyone sufficiently educated in economics to entrust with the task. Before moving to Naples, regularly salaried and with all expenses covered, Carminati will change his surname to Carmignano and pass himself off officially as a native of the Duchy of Parma. He will first study the family's proprietary assets, then move to Naples if he proves clever enough to handle the job — and, above all, if he proves loyal. But at the first misdemeanor or shortfall, the Baron will throw him into the worst prison in Sicily to await extradition to Austria. Carminati agrees and relocates temporarily to the castle of Erice, living in a flat close to what will become his future assignment. At the end of 1849, Carminati — now Carmignano — earns the Baron's trust and receives permission to move to the capital of the Two Sicilies. With a false name and a death sentence hanging over his head, he knows he must keep a low profile and avoid any

revolutionary temptations; otherwise, the Bourbon police would discover and denounce him.

The job is prestigious, well paid, and allows him to travel throughout southern Italy, especially to Sicily, where he returns often to follow the Baron's island affairs. The wound on his hand has healed quickly and left no major handicap, only a slight difficulty in using his full strength. What remains is a large star-shaped scar — not ugly, but awkward to explain — so since 1848 he has worn white gloves in public, citing a strong allergy to dust as an excuse.

Scene 11

Count Messernich's assassination makes newspapers all over the world talk. European governments begin threatening one another, and when it becomes clear that the attack is an Italian-nationalist plot, Austria withdraws its ambassador from Turin, while England demands the resignation of Cavour and his government. Despite the threats and demands, the King of Piedmont takes no concrete action, so the hunt for scapegoats begins. The casino director is dismissed, the commander of the Maltese security forces is transferred, but John is held solely responsible for the deaths of the two nobles. He has not been able to protect them, and he has also let the murderer escape. Already devastated by Helene's death, John is dismissed, arrested, and locked up in a cell in the small harbour prison. While officially the Maltese authorities lash out at him, in reality they look for a way to calm tempers without losing credibility, since Messernich's death is geopolitically irrelevant to London. And the English nobleman was a staunch republican

and therefore disliked by the crown. One night, John finds the door of his cell left open, with not a single guard in sight. He makes his way to the exit, where he finds a sailor waiting for him, who leads him to a launch moored not far away. The authorities are running him off. The launch pulls alongside a steamer, and John is taken on board: it is a Monroy ship, heading for Trapani.

John discovers an intriguing environment in Trapani: English ships come and go in large numbers, so life in the port is busy. But although Trapani is full of dive bars, taverns, gambling parlours, and brothels, it is not easy to make a living. Local guilds, akin to mafias, control all jobs and employment opportunities, and membership is required. Penniless, he decides to try everything: he approaches a ship that has just docked, ready for unloading, and begs to be hired as a stevedore. The *picciottis*, who are mobsters, refuse to accept him and even try to remove him by force. Seeing, however, that John will not leave, they pull out knives and openly challenge him. Don Titino, a well-dressed boss with a silver knife, joins the group. John sprints toward the chief and knocks him out with a powerful blow to the face. He pounces on the others, disarming them and wounding two, while the rest flee. Before the police arrive, they all scatter through the harbour's alleys, but the whole town talks of nothing else. Don Titino's family cries out for revenge for the affront. Titino, a skilled hand-to-hand fighter and undefeated duellist, has ended up in the infirmary with a shattered jaw and is unlikely to return to eating solid food, so his family immediately triggers a manhunt for John. The Baron of Sant'Anna, however, sends for the Maltese, intrigued by the affair. Such a strong and courageous man, who has taken down one of Trapani's most dangerous criminal gangs, must be in his service. He has more than one task to entrust to him.

As soon as they find him, John is taken to the castle and guaranteed protection. The Baron goes to see him, talks to him, learns his story, and convinces himself that his instinct was right. He summons Don Titino's family and tries to rebalance the situation: he offers them, in exchange for forgiveness, the Maltese man's willingness to fight for them in a series of clandestine matches. The Baron would even make his farmhouse on the Isola degli Asinelli, opposite Erice, available to host the fights. The Bourbon police would never set foot there. The purse and the bets would go to their family as compensation, and after a year, if he is still alive, John would enter the Baron's service as his bodyguard. The Mafia family accepts as well, because Don Titino has just been killed by an old rival in an ambush at the hospital. After reaching an agreement with Don Titino's family, the Baron summons John and shares the details of the deal with him. John does not have much choice: a year of fighting may prove fatal, but he has few alternatives. If he leaves the Baron's protection, Don Titino's family will kill him; yet, despite the pain of losing Helene, he does not feel ready to die. This does not mean he cares much about his future, and fighting may be a way to vent all the pain and frustration he has accumulated. If he survives, he will become the Baron's henchman; he may not be free, but he will still be alive. John accepts.

Scene 12

Throughout 1849, John fights almost nightly to the death against often huge and dangerous opponents. His agility, his innovative techniques, and his fighting rage make him a legend. The bodies of almost all his opponents end up in the sea in

a burlap sack filled with stones. Having completed that year of fighting in the best possible way, though confined to a small room in the castle or in perpetual training, John wonders what the future holds for him. He is convinced he will end up as a bodyguard or, worse, a workhorse for a slightly vain Italian nobleman. The Baron, however, has very different plans. Enthusiastic about his survival, impressed by his tenacity and by the ease with which he has provoked death, he wants to entrust him with a delicate but very lucrative task. The fights John has taken part in are only a fraction of those organised in the underground betting ring in Trapani; many other events — wrestling, boxing, sword fights to the death, dog fights, animal fights — are regularly held. These secret meetings, as John well knows, take place in unusual locations and are attended by unimaginable people, yet the money involved is enormous. Despite the Baron's right to a share of the purse and prize money as master father of Trapani and the highest Sicilian dignitary, the organisers often neglect to honour this obligation. In recent times, they have done so with increasing frequency. But the Baron cannot collect the money personally without damaging his reputation, so someone else must do it for him. Those people must be set straight, and it takes someone feared enough to convince them, if only by his presence. Now John's name inspires fear and respect throughout the Two Sicilies, and everyone knows he is the Baron's man; he would not have much difficulty carrying out the task. All he has to do is attend the events, collect the money, and put it in the safe. Someone from the administration will then come by, count it, leave the Baron's share, and take the rest to the bank. The Baron will cover the expenses, providing John with a luxurious wardrobe, a furnished apartment with servants, weapons, and ammunition.

On the other hand, this occupation may give him the chance to put aside the money he needs to retire to America and buy that ranch he had fantasised about with Helene; without her it would not be the same, but if fate wants him alive, he will at least fulfil their dream. During that year as a wrestler, John has fought and won every time thinking of her. The pain of her death is still strong in him, and his warrior grit comes from the anger and frustration of that absurd tragedy. What did Helene have to do with the dirty business of politics? Or with the disputes between states and revolutionaries? What had that bastard achieved by killing those two nobles? Only that others would come in their place. What had the murderer gained by killing Helene? Nothing. Helene has died in vain. John swears to himself that those Italian patriots will pay dearly for it, and most dearly of all will pay that piece of rotter, whoever he is, who committed the massacre in Malta. Throughout the attack and the escape through the streets of Valletta, the murderer has not uttered a word, so John does not know what his voice sounds like, and since the killer was hooded, even his face is unknown to him. But sooner or later he will find him thanks to the wound he inflicted on his hand. Such a wound leaves an indelible scar.

The Baron keeps his promise from the beginning: he takes John to one of Trapani's top tailors, and a wardrobe of custom suits is ordered and made for him. John's new home is a beautiful flat in the city centre, decorated with too many Italian flags and maps of the peninsula, which he removes and burns in the kitchen stove. In a wall wardrobe in the house, he finds an arsenal of sabres, daggers, pistols, and rifles for him and his men, because in case of need or reinforcements, he can have at his command all the thugs he requires. After the first

few days of adjusting to his new life, the Baron visits John to see how he has settled in. During their conversation, he tells him plainly: he knows about Helene's death, their engagement, and their dream of emigrating to America. The Baron's men in Malta have gathered even the tiniest traces of information about the affair and its protagonists, especially since John has entered his service. John's heart sinks, but the Baron knows more. He informs him that the murderer of Helene, though officially unidentified, is believed to be a Bolognese who escaped from Trapani a few weeks before the assassination and managed to disappear after the escape. In 1848, the people of Bologna, having driven the Austrians out of their city, saw their countryside devastated, whole villages burned, and their population exterminated. The reprisal was Messernich's idea. Perhaps the revolutionary wanted revenge for those events by killing him. The Baron provides John with forged documents to support his words: the request for imprisonment of the Bolognese, his conviction in absentia for escape, and an altered diplomatic report pointing to Messernich as the instigator of the massacre in the Emilian countryside. The murderer of his fiancée, the Baron continues, was called Pietro Gamberini. John turns livid with rage just hearing that beast's name. But why is the Baron speaking of him in the past tense? He has more fake documentation to show: a receipt for a one-way ticket from Naples to New York under the name Pietro Gamberini, and a copy of a report from a Virginia coroner certifying Gamberini's death from syphilis. The papers are stamped with the coat of arms of the Embassy of the Two Sicilies in Washington. It is now clear, the Baron concludes, why that reckless gesture was made: syphilis, in its final stage, makes one euphoric and turbulent.

With Gamberini dead, John's thirst for revenge loses its

meaning. Yet he convinces himself that if he works well, in a few years he will have enough money to buy a ranch in the United States, and if he prolongs his stay in Sicily, he may even buy it without having to worry about working. The Baron, who speaks to him in a persuasive voice to soothe his troubled soul, sees far into the future. He knows that none of John's fantasies will ever come true: the job involves not only collecting bribes — that is the least of it — but dinners in the best restaurants, parties and banquets, beautiful women, money, authority, and deference everywhere. For anyone, all of this is an intoxicating drug that is hard to resist and even harder to abandon. In fact, over time, John slowly shelves his American project: Trapani offers a favourable climate, his life is full of comforts and available girls, and many take their hats off when he passes by.

John visits the Baron regularly, either at the castle or at his palaces in Trapani, to inform him of business developments and the latest news from the underground world. He brings stories, rumours, gossip, and trends from the city to the Baron, but he never brings him money. Every two months, a man from Naples, dressed in white gloves, arrives to count the money, record the numbers in a ledger, give John his share, and replenish the expense account. He withdraws the remaining funds. Carminati — now Carmignano — knows very well who John is, because his face has remained etched in his memory: he is the man who, in Malta, wounded him and tried to catch him during the chase. John, on the other hand, does not know, because the Baron has hidden it from him, about Helene's death and her relationship with Carminati. But Mister Carmignano is unaware, because the Baron has hidden it from him, of Helene's death and her relationship with John.

Scene 13

The Baron, followed by his two flunkies, makes the staff break ranks and invites his guests to enter the castle while some servants are already unloading their luggage. Frances asks the Baron if she can meet the Englishman responsible for assembling the greenhouse. The Baron replies that he is not at the castle at the moment and that she will be able to meet him in the next few days. John, meanwhile, observes the scene from afar. He finally sees the English girl from a good family for whom he will have to reassemble her toy. It is rumoured that this girl will marry the Baron and that this marriage will consolidate a new business empire.

3

Act 3 - Garibaldi's landing

Scene 1

The first night at the castle, Frances has a strange experience. She wakes in the middle of the night because she hears her own name being called, echoing as if from the castle walls. Still sleepy from travel fatigue, she gets out of bed and carefully opens the creaking door of her room. Barefoot, she walks down the corridor, trying to understand who or what is calling her. A woman's voice invites her out of the castle and guides her into the garden, where a strange light illuminates a statue of Venus. The light suddenly disappears, the voice falls silent, and Frances becomes fully alert again. Bewildered, she takes a few seconds to realise she is in the garden. For the first time, she fixes her gaze on John as he slips back into the Garibaldian den under the dim glow of a lantern, certain that no one has noticed him. Instead, Frances sees him sneaking beneath the statue and decides to follow him, unable to silence her curiosity. She removes her

bulky nightdress and remains in her undergarments. Barefoot, trying not to make a sound, she descends the stairs leading to the cistern. The moonlight helps her distinguish the steps. When she has almost reached the bottom, the light coming from below disappears. As Frances struggles to adjust her eyes to the darkness, John's hand grips her arm, his other hand closes over her mouth, and his blue eyes scrutinise her with distrust. In the darkness, Frances sees only those eyes. When John recognises Sir Monroy's daughter in her light clothing, he releases her and remains hidden in the shadows. He murmurs to her in Italian, "Excuse me, Miss Monroy, but you should not be here," hoping to avoid being recognised. Frances, believing she is facing one of the Baron's men, also replies in Italian, "I am free to go where I please," then, hiding her embarrassment and a little fear, turns with composure and prepares to leave. She grimaces like an aristocrat as she climbs the stairs to retrieve her clothes and return to bed. Carminati's eyes watch the scene from afar. Then, fleeting as a shadow, the Milanese man walks toward the manor house.

Scene 2

The next day, still a little dazed, Frances is eager to begin assembling the greenhouse, whose pieces have almost all arrived. She scouts the castle grounds for a location that offers optimal exposure to the sun and protection from the night breezes, eventually finding it near the statue of Venus. She therefore summons the Englishman in charge of the operation. She is greatly surprised when John arrives, recognising the piercing eyes that had scrutinised her beneath the Venus statue the

previous night. But she does not show it, not as impassively as John does. Frances informs him of the chosen location and invites him to begin erecting the structure. John, in turn, goes to the Baron to ask permission and to enlist his gardeners to start the work. The Baron authorises John to organise the setting up of the greenhouse and to recruit the men he deems necessary. John is instructed to remind them whom they are working for if any issues arise. The Baron also tells him that Miss Frances will, of course, oversee every stage of the operation while awaiting the go-ahead for the transport of her camellias from England, for the moment crammed into her conservatory in Windsor. As John already knows, every Victorian stately home has one, but the Monroys' is special because her father grows only oriental plants there, imported through the East India Company, of which he is a shareholder.

Scene 3

It is in the conservatory of the Monroys' London mansion that Frances's passion for botany is born. Even as a child, with her nursemaid, she loves spending time among the plants and flowers in the greenhouse, heated by huge ceramic stoves to maintain a sub-tropical temperature. While she basks in the warmth of this indoor garden, especially in winter when it is cold and raining outside, Miss Schmidt tells her fairy tales and stories of faraway lands whose protagonists are plants and flowers with enchanting names. From the magic of those moments and from her innate curiosity, a need arises in Frances to discover what lies behind each plant, and she begins to bombard first her nurse, then the villa gardeners, with questions about flora until her

father gives her her first botany book. It is a simple treatise on taxonomy, but it is full of colour illustrations that make it precious and fascinating.

She is only seven years old, but the subject captivates her so deeply that another book follows, then another, and then another, until she ends up devouring an entire library. As an adult, Frances does not miss a single new botany book published in England. Despite the Royal Botanical Society admitting only men, she manages to subscribe and receive the organisation's botanical bulletins at home. She is also in correspondence with the most renowned English botanists of the time and especially with the chief gardeners of the greenest estates in the Empire. In fact, it is now she — and no longer her father — who supervises the park and the Winter Garden at Windsor. She decides where and which plants to grow, determines the pruning of trees and shrubs, and takes long notes on every plant specimen in the Monroy mansion. The house gardeners, who have known her since childhood, adore her so much that they would do anything for her. Frances is not like the other lady owners; she loves to get her hands dirty and help the servants whenever she has to tend to her wonderful greenhouse.

Eventually, a correspondent of hers, wanting to thank her for a suggestion that helped him solve a long-standing arboreal problem of his, sends her seeds of various types of camellias that have just arrived from India via the Company. Camellias, oriental flowers symbolising luxury, are very popular among the upper classes but are always found as cut flowers and never as potted plants. Frances, of course, has read a great deal about them, but she has never grown them. So, a few seasons after the seeds are sown, when the shrubs reach three metres and, once in bloom, look like cascades of pink, blue, and violet, she decides

that camellias will become her specialty. She begins reading all the literature she can find on the subject and questions her contacts, eventually acquiring the knowledge and skills to design and build a new greenhouse of her own. After only a few years, Frances can already call herself one of the most experienced camellia growers in the Empire.

However, her life does not revolve solely around gardening and camellias. Frances loves literature, particularly English literature, and in the evenings she likes to sit with Miss Schmidt and have the governess read aloud the passages that have impressed her most. Then she discovers Jane Austen. She is dazzled by the analysis of the female universe she finds in her novels, by the world of the country gentry so often described and so similar to the one she belongs to, and above all by the dependence Austen's heroines have on marriage, which, even for Frances, is her worst nightmare.

Furthermore, Frances, the daughter of a wealthy socialite family, studies French, the international language often used by the privileged classes, and Italian, the language of music and poetry.

Scene 4

The weeks of April pass, and the assembly work on the greenhouse continues apace. Some parts are still missing, and others, damaged in transit, are sent to be repaired or rebuilt by the Trapani blacksmiths. John tries to maintain an aloof attitude with Frances, as she is the betrothed of the owner of the house. But their age, nationality, and language make empathy between them almost inevitable. John is struck by the peculiar shape

of the greenhouse, and Frances explains that this is not just any greenhouse but a special structure she has designed for camellias, of which she is a great expert. She tells him that in England that greenhouse is regarded as a jewel for growing flowers that do not thrive there, but here in Sicily it could become the first step toward an agricultural and economic revolution.

Once the structure is set up, Frances will bring in her English camellias and observe how they adapt. These observations will allow her to design and build another greenhouse dedicated to a single type of camellia: *camellia sinensis*, otherwise known as the tea plant. John is shocked to hear talk of tea plants but keeps his composure. Frances goes on to say that the Baron has already promised her several plots of land on his estate specifically to establish a series of experimental plantations that could produce the first and only Italian tea. John's voice trembles as he asks her more questions about camellias and tea. He lets slip that he has seen several tea plantations in China and has even taken part in the destruction of the imperial one. Frances has heard about it too, from the executives and associates of the East India Company, and her father has told her that there is a rumour in China that the famous Dong Pao cultivar — the imperial tea — is extinct because the only plants of it were burned and the seeds lost during the sacking of the Forbidden City. Frances, who would like to know more about China and the Dong Pao, notices that every time she asks John a question about those topics, his face darkens and he prefers to remain vague. The only oriental subject that is not taboo for him is Chinese food. So much so that a kind of joking debate arises between them about using chopsticks instead of cutlery. According to John, the idea of chopsticks is ingenious: easy to find and, at any moment, easy to make from any piece of wood. Quite different, he says,

is the case with a fork. Besides, in the East, dishes arrive at the table already cut into pieces, so the morsels are the perfect size for chopsticks. And chopsticks are simple to use. One day, John gets hold of some boxwood branches and carves two, which he gives to Frances.

John and Frances are seen together more and more often: the construction of the greenhouse requires the constant supervision of both of them — for the practical side, to understand where it is best to plant certain seeds, and for the organisational side, to coordinate the assembly workers. If at first they seem to have several reasons to quarrel, as time passes they begin to exchange jokes and small confidences.

One night, Frances has a nightmare and cannot get back to sleep. She gets up to take a walk and get some air, even though it is late and Miss Schmidt is sound asleep. She meets John, returning from a meeting in the Garibaldians' secret hideout, tired, wearing informal clothes, and with his shirt torn; on the way back up, his sleeve has caught on a sharp stone, and through the tear his tattoo is clearly visible. Frances cannot help but notice it. Asking each other what they are doing awake at that hour, they find themselves speaking more candidly, and Frances gathers the courage to ask why John has a Tao symbol tattooed on his bicep. John replies that the Taoist emblem represents the two principles of good and evil that run parallel throughout life. He has had a terrible example of this. It was through the sacrifice of his best friend that the British succeeded at the Taku Forts. But it was he, the commander of the squadron, who received medals and honours. Pain and glory coexist in him and generate remorse, shame, sorrow, and mourning — a burden he has carried ever since. Not to mention that it was he and his men who destroyed the Dong Pao plantations to distract the Chinese

and allow the British to take the position. Frances understands. By burning the Dong Pao, John has done the British Empire a colossal favour but also tremendous harm to all mankind. She has heard of that Asian symbol and points out to him that the white dot in the black wave means that in every evil there is a seed of good, so there is still hope. John sighs and replies that, according to the other half of the Tao, in every good there lurks a kernel of evil, as the black dot shows. He is referring to their friendship, and fearing he has gone too far, he abruptly ends the conversation and heads for his quarters, leaving Frances puzzled.

Scene 5

On 5 May, Carmignano arrives in Erice in haste to bring John a confidential cable from the Piedmontese Freemasons. Some men linked to British intelligence have delivered it to him in Naples two days earlier, instructing him to board the first available steamer and hand the news to their appointee as soon as possible. The message informs John of Garibaldi's departure from Genoa and requests his assistance in identifying a suitable port for the landing, considering that the island's capital, Palermo, will be the general's first conquest. John has been contemplating this scenario for some time and has ultimately selected Marsala as the perfect location for the troop landing. In that port, at the roadstead, two fully armed British warships stand ready to defend the interests of British citizens against potential coups d'état by the Neapolitan government, as well as insurrectionist or revolutionary attempts by local agitators. Moreover, two large British wine-trading companies

operate in Marsala and maintain vast warehouses in the port. The Navy of the Kingdom of Naples knows that those buildings are off-limits and that damaging them — even accidentally — risks provoking a prompt and violent British response. For this reason, the Bourbon ships are unlikely to dare bombard the port. The garrison protecting the town will be paid handsomely to withdraw when Garibaldi arrives, also because, for those poor soldiers, resisting would mean certain death. John makes a rough calculation of the number of days it might take the Garibaldians to reach Sicily and concludes that they will be in sight of the coast of Trapani more or less on 11 May. Carmignano alerts the Baron to the news and receives instructions to remain in Sicily at least until the Garibaldi cyclone has passed from the island onto the mainland.

Scene 6

The night of the 10th is a particularly hot one. Carmignano, unable to sleep, wanders into the library and finds a strange booklet. It has a tough leather cover embossed with a viper that stares at the reader and seems ready to bite. The snake's body continues along the upper rib of the book, and the tail becomes a bookmark. He decides to read it in the garden near the nymphaeum and the statue of Venus. He reaches the bench but realises he has forgotten to bring a jug of water and a glass, so he goes back into the castle, leaving the book on the bench.

In the meantime, Frances jumps out of bed, feeling as if drawn by a mysterious force that leads her toward the garden, the statue of Venus, and the bench. She notices the book resting there and the snake adorning the cover. She takes it in her hand

and opens it, leafing through the pages. The text appears in two different languages. The first, unfamiliar to Frances, features calligraphy that looks like Arabic, while a Latin translation appears beside it. She has no desire to grapple with the language of Caesar, so she does not even attempt to read the contents. She simply flips to the last page, where she finds an intricate signature and a wax seal. Then she hears a hissing sound and feels something brush her hand. She snaps the book shut and is startled to see that the viper has come to life, its red eyes fixed on her with fury. Frances has no time to react before the creature bites her hand. The pain is so intense that she faints.

Carmignano, returning with the water, finds Frances lying unconscious on the ground. He runs to call for help and returns with a couple of servants. He tries to revive her, but without success. He spots the book on the ground and sees that the girl's hand has turned purple. The Baron arrives and demands to know what has happened. Then he notices the book. In a fit of rage, he asks who has broken into the library and taken out that volume, which is forbidden to everyone. Carminati apologises; he did not know the book was untouchable, and, perplexed, he asks why the Baron is so furious. The Baron gives no answer but immediately orders that Frances be taken to her room. In the meantime, she develops a very high fever.

Miss Schmidt stays by her side and watches over her all night, but in the morning Frances is even worse. A doctor from Palermo, collected directly from his home by the Maltese, arrives. After examining the patient, despite the oddity of the case, he makes his diagnosis: mercury poisoning. The metal's penetration appears far advanced, and he concludes that Frances has no further options.

The Baron is beside himself with fury: his bride-to-be is dying

because of a book no one must touch. Frances's death would mean losing a powerful bond with Monroy, who would revert from future father-in-law to mere business partner.

Scene 7

On the morning of the 11th, John is not in Erice because he must find a way to communicate with Garibaldi and indicate the exact location of the landing. He chooses one of Monroy's cargo ships, which is officially putting to sea from Trapani for a delivery to the continent. When the cargo ship crosses the Garibaldian steamers off the coast of Palermo, flying the flags of the International Nautical Code, the ship's signalman, following precise orders, identifies himself as a friend and signals the captains to anchor off in Marsala.

John and his men are hiding in the English warehouses in the port when the Garibaldian ships arrive at the roadstead, and he signals them the go-ahead with a small mirror. John knows that the local Bourbon troops have been sent back to Palermo on the pretext of preventing uprisings in the city. The military commander of the island has been well paid to give this order, as well as to instruct the ships of the Neapolitan Navy not to bombard the port or the convoy, so as not to anger the British. Thus the town is empty of troops on land, and the Bourbon navy offshore has its hands tied. Under a few cannon salvos fired *pro forma* from the Bourbon ships, Garibaldi disembarks on a quay in the port of Marsala and finds John waiting to welcome him.

After a few pleasantries, Garibaldi is escorted to the town hall, where the Marsala council — with the strong support of English and Sicilian Freemasons — makes an act of submission to him.

The conquest of Sicily has just begun. Without encountering much resistance, the Garibaldians occupy Trapani, but the Baron, who is its governor, is not in the town hall. The president of the civic council, who has been waiting for them, brings a message from the Baron inviting Garibaldi and his staff to join him at his castle in Erice, where he will sign the surrender of the city. In this way, the Garibaldians can supply themselves with weapons, ammunition, and uniforms without arousing suspicion about the Baron's involvement in facilitating Garibaldi's enterprise, and the Baron can speak frankly to Garibaldi without having to disguise his words.

The General Staff of the Garibaldians rides toward Erice on horseback, while John, Garibaldi, and a team of quartermasters reach Erice through the tunnels that, from the outskirts of Trapani, emerge into the cistern high up in Erice. John wants to show this path to Garibaldi so his men can retrieve weapons, ammunition, and uniforms without anyone noticing and without realising that these materials were originally stored beneath the castle with the Baron's complicity.

Inside the cistern, John explains to Garibaldi all the work done so far and briefs him on the logistical and military challenges the Garibaldians will face both in Sicily and on the mainland. After listening carefully and noting the key aspects of the situation, Garibaldi ends the briefing by declaring that, despite the many obstacles ahead, he will not stop in Naples. Once the Bourbons are dealt with, he and his men will set their sights on Rome.

Unseen, the Baron eavesdrops on the conversation from behind the grate that overlooks one of the tunnels leading to the castle — the one whose entrance lies in the armoury.

After leaving the cistern, John and Garibaldi rejoin the other Garibaldians, and all are escorted by Carmignano on a tour of the castle. Afterwards, the Maltese lead them to the Baron's study. Following the customary exchange of pleasantries, Garibaldi stresses to the Baron the need to plan the next steps in preparation for the conquest of Palermo. The Baron says that Garibaldi's first move must be to declare the Bourbons deposed from Sicily's throne and assume control of the island's government. The time to attack Palermo will come once the Thousand, the Legion, and the many volunteers joining the red shirts are fully equipped. The Baron intends to handle the formal and bureaucratic aspects of the transition of power to avoid fractures with the Sicilian aristocracy, while Styles will communicate strategic moves to the Freemason brothers, who will work to ensure Garibaldi's acceptance as the island's dictator among the upper echelons of civil society.

The Baron retrieves a parchment from his desk — it is the official document of Trapani's surrender. However, he reminds those present that he and the other aristocrats must maintain appearances. So the document states that the city surrenders only temporarily, overwhelmed by invading forces, and that the government's capitulation is coerced. The Baron must phrase it this way to conceal his Garibaldian sympathies and preserve his standing with the king and the Neapolitan administration. Garibaldi acknowledges the nobleman's reasoning, signs the document, and hands it to one of his officers.

Now it is time for Garibaldi to take his leave and return to his troops, who must prepare for the attack on Palermo. However, to show that he is not naïve and that he fully understands whom he is dealing with, he asks the Baron why he has not introduced them to his future bride, the daughter of Monroy, a man who

has greatly contributed to the Garibaldian cause. The Baron apologises but explains that he has not done so because Frances is unwell — seriously ill, in fact. Garibaldi insists on visiting her in her room, and the Baron, reluctantly, agrees.

Upon reaching the future baroness's quarters, they encounter Miss Schmidt, who blocks their path, explaining that Frances is in such poor condition that the doctor has ordered she receive no visitors. Garibaldi asks why she is so ill. Miss Schmidt replies that it appears to be mercury poisoning, although no one knows how she was exposed to the metal. Garibaldi remains unfazed — he has seen dozens of similar poisonings among gold prospectors in South America. If the mercury intake is not excessive, there is a way to recover. Garibaldi instructs one of his men to summon Raoni, a Black Brazilian of mixed Indigenous descent who has accompanied him in his campaigns since 1848. Speaking partly in Portuguese and partly in an Indigenous language, Garibaldi explains the situation. Understanding immediately, Raoni retrieves a green powder from his bag — a blend of Amazonian plants that, when dissolved in water, can neutralise the effects of intoxications and poisonings, even from severe toxins such as mercury, lead, and arsenic. Indigenous peoples of the Amazon use this remedy to treat insect and snake bites and reactions to poisonous plants. Raoni fills a small jar with the powder, and Garibaldi explains that it should be dissolved in water and taken in doses of five drops in the morning and five in the evening. Miss Schmidt quickly prepares the remedy and administers it to Frances, who reacts with a sudden jolt. Meanwhile, Monroy arrives, overwhelmed with grief. Garibaldi clasps his hand and reassures him — the problem afflicting Frances has a rather infallible cure.

In the following days, Frances's health improves. Her fever

subsides, she is able to ingest liquids, and the haematoma that had spread from her hand to her entire arm gradually recedes. Eventually, she regains consciousness. Both her father and Miss Schmidt anxiously ask where she might have come into contact with mercury and how she could have been poisoned in the villa's park. But Frances remembers nothing of what happened. In fact, upon waking, she initially believes she is in her own bed as if nothing had occurred — only to discover that she has been unconscious for almost a week. Each day, Garibaldi sends the Brazilian, accompanied by a Garibaldian soldier, to Erice to check on Frances's health. Monroy, now indebted to Garibaldi for saving his daughter's life, vows to support him with even more funds, ammunition, and ships.

Scene 8

On 14 May, Garibaldi travels with Joe to Salemi, near Trapani, where various local figures await him. Following a secret order from the Baron, they have independently funded and armed a company of Sicilian volunteers. In the town hall, before the assembled crowd, Garibaldi officially assumes the regency of the government of Sicily. The next day, after organising his troops, Garibaldi advances toward Palermo. At Calatafimi, he encounters the Bourbon army. For a couple of hours, both sides observe each other cautiously, until the Bourbons appear to prepare an attack with their cavalry. Garibaldi realises that the front lines of his forces will not withstand the Bourbon charge, and the risk would be a humiliating retreat. The only option is to resist with bayonets. Mounted on horseback, Garibaldi rides to the front line to rally his men. With sword in hand, he

tries to instil the right motivation. A Bourbon sniper spots an opportunity and lines Garibaldi up in his sights. But Joe, also on horseback, notices the danger, rushes toward the general, and, without hesitation, shoves him aside, causing him to fall to the ground — fortunately unharmed. However, Joe is now in the sniper's trajectory, and when the shot is fired, he is struck in the shoulder by the bullet.

The Baron and Monroy observe the battle from their carriage, stationed on a hilltop. They immediately notice the sniper's shot and watch as Joe falls to the ground after pushing Garibaldi aside to save his life. Using binoculars, they see that Joe has regained consciousness — he is not dead. Losing Styles is not an option at the moment, given his irreplaceable role as a liaison officer. Deciding they have had enough of this tragicomedy, the Baron dispatches one of his bodyguards to inform General Landi, the commander of the Bourbon troops, that it is time to conclude the battle, which, according to prior agreements, was meant to remain a mere skirmish. Landi, having been generously paid for his betrayal, soon orders his men to retreat, leaving both his soldiers and the Garibaldians astonished. Thus, the Battle of Calatafimi is won.

Before continuing toward Palermo, Garibaldi checks on Joe's condition at the field hospital set up for the battle. He is told that Joe has already received medical attention and that the bullet was extracted easily. Although the wound is deep, it is not life-threatening. According to the military doctors, he is expected to recover within twelve to fifteen weeks. Lying in bed and under sedatives to dull the pain, Joe hears the General thanking him for saving his life. He manages only to smile, proud of having fulfilled his duty. The next day, an ambulance-adapted carriage arrives in Calatafimi to transport

Joe to Erice Castle, where he will spend his convalescence in absolute rest, as per the Baron's orders. Meanwhile, Frances, now recovered despite lingering effects, prepares a special room for Joe in a castle annex and organises shifts among the servants to ensure he always has someone by his side.

Scene 9

Just as Garibaldi has now entered Palermo and is steadily sweeping aside the last Bourbon resistances in the city, the steamer carrying Father Corso and his entourage docks in the port of Trapani. Waiting for them on the pier are the Rector of the Jesuit College of Trapani, a monsignor representing the Bishop, and a procession of clerics and prelates from the archdiocese. Officially, they are there to pay homage to and welcome a great missionary returning to Italy. But the celebrations are short-lived, because as soon as they arrive at the college in the city centre, Father Corso finds himself immediately summoned to an extremely secret, closed-door meeting with the Rector, the Bishop of Trapani, and the Archbishop of Palermo, who carries a Vatican mandate and therefore speaks on behalf of the pope.

The instructions the Jesuit sent from China have been carried out to the letter. As he requested, the bishop has gathered in a diocesan warehouse the aquavit produced by the farms of the Sicilian religious institutes, and the archbishop — through the double game of the Baron of Sant'Anna — has had him accredited as head of medical and health services within the Garibaldian ranks. The rector hands him a dossier containing all the names, roles, biographies, and known information about those behind Garibaldi's enterprise. Father Corso leafs through

the file and notices that the documentation on this Baron of Sant'Anna is particularly extensive. The rector interrupts the Jesuit's thoughts and summarises what Father Corso will later read. The Baron — the most powerful and wealthy man in Sicily — although officially a champion of the most uncompromising Catholicism, is no secret to the Church: he is also a Freemason, that is, someone who supports the most unrestrained idea of progress. Thus, as a Catholic, he is strongly opposed to the Italian conquest of Rome and to the end of the popes' temporal power; but as a Freemason, he favours the annexation of the Two Sicilies to the Kingdom of Italy, which promises freedom of the press, of speech, of expression, and of association — freedoms that, according to the Freemasons, serve to boost economic growth. Since there is now no doubt that Garibaldi's plans include the conquest of the Eternal City — which should come after the fall of Naples — the Baron, who pushes to expel the Bourbons but does not want Garibaldi to march out of Campania in arms and cross into Lazio, has declared himself willing to collaborate with the Church to halt the advance of the Redshirts at the Volturno River. The archbishop, however, points out that the Pope favours a total failure of Garibaldi's enterprise rather than a partial success. The Piedmontese have proved anticlerical in their political choices, they intend to annex papal territories and secularise them, and at the same time they are plotting to overthrow the Bourbons — a dynasty that is deeply Catholic and profoundly devoted to the Holy Father. Not to mention that this piratical expedition is taking place under the aegis of a Freemasonry under excommunication, and with the support of the English, heretics because they are Protestants. A shiver runs down Father Corso's spine. The rector advises the Jesuit to adopt a cautious and measured attitude with the Baron, taking care not

to contradict his plans too openly, even though the Vatican has different objectives. As Father Corso has already understood, the Baron is the primary benefactor of the Jesuit college in the city and of many other convents and monasteries in the province, while providing the Sicilian Church as a whole with protection and financial backing. It is not the moment to make an enemy of him. Father Corso grasps the delicacy of the situation at once and assures them he will exercise great care in his dealings with the Sicilian nobleman. The Bishop of Trapani recalls that the Baron's endorsement has been essential in allowing Corso and his men to enter the Garibaldian ranks without arousing suspicion. Many priests view the Church's Temporal Power unfavourably and are converting to the nationalist patriotism that demands a separation between Church and State. The Baron has presented the Jesuit as an enlightened, progressive Catholic who, by taking part in the expedition, will attempt to demonstrate that the Church and Modernity can coexist. This is not expressly forbidden by the pope. But if the nobleman were to feel obstructed by the Church, he could expose to Garibaldi the Vatican's plan to sabotage his modernising enterprise — and everything would go up in smoke. The archbishop, however, points out that the Church has an ace up its sleeve. For the Baron to marry Frances Monroy validly in the cathedral — Frances being a wealthy Anglican girl — his future bride must convert to Catholicism. And for the conversion to be valid, it must be carried out under the guidance of an experienced missionary. The Diocese of Trapani has therefore appointed Father Corso as the official catechist of the future baroness. His long stay in the Far East has made him familiar with the operations of Monroy Co., of which Frances is the heiress, and he speaks English well enough that the convert will not later be able to abjure

by claiming linguistic misunderstandings. The archbishop expresses regret that managing the catechism lessons will complicate Father Corso's logistics somewhat, since he will have to shuttle between Trapani and the Garibaldian hospitals — both mobile and fixed — scattered across Sicily. Father Corso replies that he is not concerned, as this will be only a temporary inconvenience: according to the plan he presented in Macao and which Rome later approved, Garibaldi will be stopped at Messina. The Jesuit's superiors smile with satisfaction. The meeting is over. Father Corso shakes the Rector's hand, kisses the bishop's ring, kneels before the archbishop, and finally presses his lips to the wax seal impressed by the pope's ring, which stands on the document investing him with the mission of saving the Holy See at any cost.

Scene 10

The next morning, at first light, Father Corso climbs the road leading to Erice to meet the Baron. On this occasion, he intends to make the acquaintance of his future catechumen and to check the wound of Styles who, he has been told, is recovering at the castle after the Battle of Calatafimi. This way he will finally meet him in person. Duncan is with him as well. From the first day of the voyage until now, he has been kept sedated with an opium-based mixture while still remaining under irocaine, so that his level of aggression stays high but he does not give in to reckless impulses. On the ship, as a precaution, he was also kept under constant watch by the two armed Taiping, taking

turns. For the visit to Erice, Father Corso has administered an additional dose of tranquillisers. The risk is that, upon seeing Styles, he might lose control and ruin the Vatican's plans — which, if it happened, would mean exile for Corso on some remote, wild island in the Pacific, attempting to convert cannibals who, rather than receiving the Body of Christ, would prefer to eat the bodies of missionaries. The Baron gives Father Corso a grand welcome, saying he is honoured to receive in his castle a Jesuit of such renown, newly returned from the East. He asks the missionary countless questions about China and about the recently concluded Sino-French-British war, lingering, curiously, on the details of the peace treaty concerning trade and exports. Father Corso knows that the Baron is a partner in Monroy Co., and therefore does not attach much importance to the nobleman's unusual questions. What does surprise him is the Baron's interest in opium, in its trade, and in the effects the substance has on a population.

The clock strikes eight, and the master of the house invites the priest to breakfast so he may introduce him to Frances and to her father. While they are at table, the Jesuit — a consummate actor — displays an English with an almost aristocratic accent, imitating that of various Anglo-Saxon nobles he has known in the past, and, aware of Monroy's business interests, launches into stories and anecdotes about China and tea, noting that the current situation in the Celestial Empire would allow Western companies to make great profits in Asia. He speaks with deep knowledge of Chinese geography and mentality, of the best ports and commercial hubs in Asia, and of the economic potential of that technologically backward empire. Monroy is so captivated by his words that he would almost be ready to entrust him with the direction of his operations in China. Father Corso's

attention shifts to Frances. Having learned from the dossiers he received about her passion for botany, he speaks to her — as a pharmacologist — of the marvels of Chinese flora, describing trees and plants unknown in Europe, capturing her attention and interest. Once he has broken through her reserve, Father Corso asks whether she is religious, and Frances hesitates before replying that she is baptised and has received the sacraments. The Jesuit reminds her that those sacraments were administered by the Anglican Church and are therefore not considered valid by the Catholic one, except for baptism. For this reason, Frances will have to follow catechism lessons and convert to Roman doctrine if she wishes to marry. Frances, unaware of the whole story behind the catechism and the conversion, is on the verge of exploding and making a scene, but her father silences her with an icy glare. Frances sinks into a deathly silence, aware that she has no possibility of questioning even one of these decisions — decisions that concern her personally.

After breakfast, the Baron and Father Corso withdraw to the study for a private conversation. Having immediately clarified that they both support Garibaldi only on the condition that he stop in Naples without crossing into Lazio — and that any other geopolitical design is excluded — they speak about the situation in Sicily, about how Garibaldi has taken Palermo, and about the next stages of the expedition. On this point, Father Corso asks how many wounded there are so far and what their conditions are. According to the first reports, the Baron says, the medicines have not yet arrived from England because London is waiting to see how the enterprise develops; therefore, they lack anaesthetics and disinfectants. Father Corso promises to appeal to the Archbishop of Palermo so that the

ecclesiastical pharmacies of the island may make their stocks of medicaments available, while, as for anaesthetics, he himself has at his disposal a large quantity of aquavit along with a series of opiate preparations used in China to ease pain or to render patients unconscious before an operation.

Father Corso informs the Baron that he has learned a Garibaldian officer of English nationality has been wounded and is recovering at the castle. The Baron confirms it, and the Jesuit asks to visit him personally. Joe says he is relieved that the expedition's doctor has come to see him, as he is suffering terrible pain in his shoulder, the wound still being fresh. Father Corso removes the bandage, examines the injured area, and has his bag brought to him. He takes out a healing ointment and spreads it over the wound, then sprinkles it with drops of a soothing oriental oil whose effects are felt immediately, greatly easing the pain. He re-bandages the wound and urges the patient to take care of himself and avoid unnecessary strain. He will return to visit him as soon as possible. Joe, partly relieved from the post-traumatic suffering and partly dazed by the priest's affable manner, declares himself glad that a doctor of such great experience has decided to care for the Garibaldian wounded, and urges him to reach the military hospitals near Palermo as soon as he can. Father Corso reassures him and calls his assistant, waiting outside the door, to help him with the instruments and the bag. Duncan enters the room and stops for a moment as if uncertain. He has been waiting for this moment for a long time, but he has been ordered to do nothing. His greatest enemy is only a few steps away, and part of him wants nothing more than to attack him while he is weak. He cannot, because something seems to hold him back. In fact, Father Corso, not excluding the possibility of a violent reaction, has gone heavy on the sedatives

that day. So Duncan approaches the bag, closes it carefully, and heads toward the door without saying a word. Father Corso, with satisfaction, notices that beneath the hood Duncan's clouded eyes shine with hatred — but despite that, he has kept control.

4

Act 4 - The Bellina

Scene 1

Since Joe is wounded and bedridden, work on the greenhouse proceeds slowly, even though the metal structure is practically fully assembled. Only the glass panes are missing, but without Joe to handle their transport and installation, all Frances can do is begin arranging the interior furnishings. So now Frances has much more free time. Under the pretext of asking a few questions about the greenhouse, she often goes to visit Joe. Sometimes she spends a long time there. Their relationship grows increasingly close and playful, to the point that when the two are together, everything else seems to fade into the background. Strange rumours begin to spread among the castle servants, eventually reaching John's ears. The Maltese, who sees everything, pays no attention to the matter. The girl is an heiress, and Styles is only a soldier. Nothing can happen between them. They are both English, young, with many interests in

common. It is natural that they seek each other out. These are the last weeks of freedom for the girl; after the wedding, her role as Baroness will no longer allow her much. And in any case, once he has recovered, Styles will leave with Garibaldi for Naples, and the two will never see each other again. Yet Frances's behaviour with Joe becomes downright brazen. Of course, Miss Schmidt is always with them, but such familiarity between the two is beginning to be inappropriate. The servants' whispers grow more insistent. Frances reaches the limit when she once arrives very late to catechism and, another time, does not go at all, claiming a headache. The news that the English lady who must convert to Catholicism in order to marry the Baron is snubbing catechism begins to circulate among the respectable circles of Trapani, and the Baron is even summoned by the bishop, who has been informed of the matter by Father Corso.

The Baron returns to Erice in a fury and summons Monroy to his study. He tells him of the humiliation he had to endure before the bishop — he, a devout Sant'Anna — all because of his daughter. This was not the agreement. Does Sir Monroy not understand that the nobility of the Sant'Anna family is what will elevate both him and his daughter? Not to mention the future — or futures — of the heirs, who will inherit both the Monroy and the Sant'Anna estates. Monroy's grandchildren, wealthy and aristocratic, could conquer the world. Monroy, intoxicated by such lofty prospects, can only agree with him. Frances must resume her lessons with Father Corso, who is travelling back and forth between Trapani and the Garibaldians solely for her. She must also stop spending time with that Styles and, above all, for the immediate future, she must no longer be sullen or indifferent with her future husband, but agreeable and compliant. If she resists, not only will the greenhouse never be completed, but it

will be dismantled, cut into small pieces, and melted down to make armour for the puppets of street marionette shows. And when the camellias — now being shipped — arrive in Sicily, he will personally see to it that they wither one by one.

Monroy goes to Frances in a state of obvious agitation and finds her getting ready to visit Joe. She is holding a tempting box of marzipan sweets she had sent for from a pastry shop in town. Monroy loses his temper and a furious quarrel erupts. But when he sees his daughter distraught and in despair, his father's heart softens and his tone calms. Monroy can do nothing but appeal to Frances's good nature, asking her to give up the captain, resume her catechism lessons, and begin to step into the role of Baroness Sant'Anna. But Frances refuses to listen to reason, and Monroy then decides to lock her in her apartments until she agrees to terms. As he leaves, he orders Miss Schmidt not to leave those rooms and not to let his daughter leave them either. Then he goes to find the Maltese and explains the need to place an armed guard to prevent the girl from entering or leaving the building. The Maltese complies and goes to confer with the Baron.

The Baron reflects on the fact that Styles is no longer of any use to him. Garibaldi has landed, and he can now complete his enterprise without the Englishman. Since it is Styles who has put strange ideas into Frances's head, it is worth eliminating him. That very night, the captain will be served a series of drugged dishes. While he sleeps deeply, John will take care of killing him by suffocating him with a pillow. Then Father Corso will be summoned who, being equally tired of that Protestant sabotaging his catechism lessons, will certify the officer's death as "septicaemia" or some kind of "infection," passing the murder off as a natural death caused by a worsening of his wound. John points out that Frances knows Joe is recovering

and will not believe the story of his relapse and "natural" death. All the better, replies the Baron: that way she will understand who truly commands here. What does the girl want? For her future noble husband to kill her potential future plebeian lover in a duel?

Joe, in the meantime, notices that Frances has not come that day. He leans out of the window and sees that no one is working on the greenhouse. Perhaps something has happened to Frances. He had told her more than once that their meetings would enrage the Baron, but she always downplayed it. Standing up with some effort, he gets dressed and goes outside. He stops one of the workers and asks why no one is working on the greenhouse. He is told that the Baron has halted everything until further notice. Joe then pretends he wants to go speak with Frances about the greenhouse, but when he reaches the wing of the castle where the baronial apartments are located, he finds a guard at the door who lets no one through: the future Baroness cannot receive anyone. Joe asks whether the Baroness can receive messages, and the guard nods. Joe returns to his room to write a letter. He wants to convince Frances to give up their friendship, to begin behaving like a noblewoman, and to accept the fact that the Baron is her husband. John Styles will leave her life as soon as he is strong enough to return to battle, but if she stays and does not adapt to her new life, what will become of her camellias? And above all, of her tea project? That is her future, and she cannot afford to throw it away. In the letter, Joe recounts the episode of the Mandarin and the fact that he is in possession of the Da Hong Pao seeds. He lingers on the description of the seeds to underline their value and importance, and concludes by saying he has hidden them in a safe place. When he finishes writing, he places the letter in an envelope, seals it with wax, and brings it

to the guard. The man takes the envelope and sets it on a small table nearby. Joe insists that it is urgent, but the man replies that only the female servants or the clergy may enter the private apartments of the Baroness. When they bring her the first meal, they will deliver the mail as well. Joe leaves, disheartened.

The Maltese, hidden in the shadows behind a suit of armour, steps out of his hiding place and takes the letter, which he opens and reads as ordered by the Baron. What he finds inside sends him straight to his master. The assassination of Styles must be postponed — at least until those seeds are in their hands.

Scene 2

Father Corso, as head of Garibaldi's medical team, immediately stands out for his expertise and organisational skill. Not only has he restocked the field pharmacies with medicines, but his methods—both on the operating table and in the postoperative phase—prove remarkably effective thanks to the mixture of alcohol and opium he prepares. The soldiers suffer far less during the extraction of bullets, and in the days following surgery his oriental ointments make the wounds less prone to infection, reducing the risk of gangrene and thus avoiding unnecessary amputations.

Duncan, now Father Corso's shadow, follows him step by step. After the first days of bewilderment, everyone grows accustomed to this hooded figure who, remaining mostly silent, is always within earshot of the Jesuit. When the first English casualty arrives at the hospital, Father Corso devotes great care and attention to him, then has Duncan escort the man back to

the camp of the British Legion, recommending rest. Properly instructed, once he reaches the camp Duncan reveals to the others that he is English and had worked as a mercenary in China, then was captured by the Chinese and brutally tortured: they had even cut some of his vocal cords, which is why his voice is so hoarse. The English soldiers feel pity for him. Father Corso, Duncan continues, had treated him and saved his life just in time. Aware of the sinful life he had led until then, Duncan had abandoned his weapons and taken the habit, deciding to serve the priest and live as a missionary. As soon as the British soldiers show sympathy toward him, he offers them a small vial, presented as a powerful Chinese remedy prepared by the Jesuit, meant to instil courage, strengthen them on the battlefield, and keep them in good health. Given the reputation the Jesuit has earned as a remarkable pharmacologist, the English soldiers accept readily. Since the substance is soluble in various ways, he suggests adding it to the tea boiling over the fire. Then he has a cup poured for himself, showing them that he drinks it too, and they all imitate him. Before taking his leave, he gives them the vial with the substance, as instructed.

The next day, violent quarrels break out among the English, ending up before the Garibaldian officers. They try to settle the disputes, reconcile the fighters, and assign a few days of punishment. In the following days, the verbal clashes turn into open brawls, both among the British and among the other Italian battalions. Worried about the turn things are taking, the Garibaldian high command informs Garibaldi of the situation: they assume that the cause of such violence may be too much wine or too much aquavit, which the English are not accustomed to. Garibaldi knows that his followers were accurately selected both in London and in Sicily, and therefore they are not adventurers

ready to mutiny after the first drink. He decides to inform Styles and ask him how to intervene.

Scene 3

On the second day of Frances's lockdown, a group of Garibaldian officers arrives in Erice and asks to speak with Joe Styles. They are received and escorted by the Baron, who decides to take part in the meeting. They recount what has happened and explain that they have been sent by Garibaldi himself. Joe is taken aback. He personally selected most of the men and was careful to avoid recruiting troublemakers or drunkards, so alcohol cannot be the problem. Even though he has not yet fully recovered and his shoulder still hurts, he boards the first ship departing for Catania to see for himself what is going on.

Arriving at the camp, exhausted from the journey and the ride, Joe summons all the soldiers of the Legion and questions them one by one. They seem strange, at times distraught, as if a fire were burning inside them, and those who have been placed under arrest for serious infractions display almost schizoid behaviour. Determined to get to the bottom of the matter but too tired to continue, Joe has a cot prepared and lies down to rest in the officers' tent. Suddenly, from the Legion's bivouac, in the middle of the night, angry voices rise, turning into a quarrel and finally into a gunshot, fortunately gone astray. Joe wakes with a start and runs to see what has happened: among the sentries, an argument had broken out, escalating first into blows and then into weapons being drawn. The guards are unable to restrain their bursts of rage, so Joe has them tied up. After yet another round of questioning, he realises that the causes are

trivial and the outbursts of anger completely unjustified. None of the soldiers, however, seems drunk: they had only stopped to drink tea from the pot, and that is when the fight began. Investigating further, Joe learns of the story told by the hooded friar, of the vials he brought every day to the Legion, and of the likely tampering with the tea. He forbids its use until further notice and has the empty vials handed over to him. Furious at the discovery, he heads to Father Corso's tent to demand an explanation, sensing that there must be some substance in the tea. He finds Duncan standing guard outside the tent, agitated as well, and is brusquely told to go back to bed and that Father Corso will not receive him at that hour. Knowing that Duncan once served as a soldier in China, Joe tries appealing to camaraderie, but the hooded friar grows increasingly threatening in his replies. Joe, however, has no intention of backing down until someone gives him a plausible explanation for why his men are being drugged. Voices rise. Duncan, no longer able to restrain himself, grabs Joe and considers seizing the opportunity to kill him, but a guard from the English Legion arrives, interrupts them, and separates them, pulling Joe away.

The next day, Joe goes to the hospital to have his wound cleaned and the bandage changed, asking specifically for Father Corso to do it. The priest receives him and examines him, noting the progress of the healing. Halfway through the visit, Joe confronts him and shows him the vials, telling him that he knows the hooded friar distributed them to his men and that they are the only plausible cause of the English soldiers' strange behaviour. With a grave voice, Father Corso admits not only that he knows about it, but that he is the one behind the whole affair. He justifies himself by saying that, since the English are not used to Sicilian water, there was a risk of typhus outbreaks,

and the substance was meant to sanitise it. He goes on to say that it should have been harmless, but since the English make tea with it, the substance, mixed with the theine, generates irritability and abnormal behaviour. The Jesuit tries to reassure him: by now his men have become immunised to Sicilian water, so it is no longer necessary to administer it. Father Corso now knows that the substance works even on a large scale, so stopping its administration to the English will not be a major setback for his plan. The barrels of aquavit he has had sent by the Bishop will do the hard work on the entire Garibaldian expeditionary force. They will all be laced with irocaine before being distributed to the troops. The Jesuit then asks Joe to let him finish examining the wound, applies an ointment, and bandages him again. Without hesitation, he calls Duncan into the room and orders him to prepare several packets of herbs for Joe to infuse, to calm the spirits of his men. Once Duncan has left to carry out the task, Father Corso speaks to Joe in a strange, almost sing-song tone, instilling in his mind an overwhelming tiredness: he is waiting for the ointment he applied—made with psychoactive substances—to take full effect. Joe slowly feels himself calming down; he is almost entranced by the priest's words, which suddenly seem convincing and full of meaning. Shortly after, the young man is in a state of deep quiet and has lost the ability to speak. At that point Duncan returns, ready to throw himself at him, but Father Corso stops him with a gesture. Joe, unaware of anything, takes the herbs and returns to the Legion, lies down on his cot, and sleeps until the next day. In the following days, thanks also to the herbal infusions, tempers settle and everything returns to normal. The camp is about to be moved closer to Messina in preparation for taking the city.

Scene 4

While Joe is away, a dispatch from London arrives in Erice addressed to him, and it is delivered to the Baron, who decides to open it given Joe's absence. Inside is a message from Major Styles to his son, warning him about Father Corso: no one can explain why he has joined the Garibaldians, and the British military police have discovered that he is the mastermind behind the Taiping Rebellion. A rebellion which, once Garibaldi's campaign is over, would be crushed by England together with the Chinese imperial troops. Therefore, if at such a delicate moment he has left China to involve himself in the Garibaldi affair, something significant must be behind it. The Baron decides to burn the message. He will find a plausible excuse to justify why the dispatch was never delivered.

Frances's confinement lasts a week. During all that time, despite her father's perfectly reasonable speeches about her wish to be free again so she can finish assembling the greenhouse and begin working with the plants, no argument is strong enough to convince her to marry the Baron willingly. She feels the need to speak with Joe, because she believes he is the only person capable of listening to her and understanding her: ever since they met—and perhaps in her entire life—he has always told her what he truly thinks, respectfully but without ever treating her with undue favour. Not to mention that he has never spent time with her out of interest in her father's wealth or in her beauty. Even after a week of forced confinement, Frances's thoughts have never strayed from Joe, nor from how wonderful it had been to spend time with him, even just talking. But Joe is not

even in Erice. Miss Schmidt has told her that he has left for the front to join Garibaldi. Worried that something might happen to him, every day she leans out of the window, waiting to see a carriage bringing him back to the castle. But that carriage never arrives.

One night, Frances waits so long at the window that she falls asleep on the chair where she is sitting. She is awakened by a strange sound, like stone shifting. To her great surprise, the small marble figurine on the table beside her—an exact replica of the Venus statue in the garden—begins to move slowly. It calls her name in a whisper and with the slow movements of its arms. Frances rubs her eyes, trying to understand whether she is dreaming or awake; then, seeing that everything is real, she approaches the object. The figurine whispers that if she wants to see her beloved again, she must arrange to be freed by pretending to accept the Baron's proposal with goodwill. Frances is incredulous and tries to object, but the voice tells her that it is vital for her to be free to move around the castle. Something is going to happen. Frances asks who it is, but the figurine brings a finger of its right hand to its lips, signalling silence. At that moment, sharp knocks at the door of Frances's apartments. It is the guard, asking whether the Baroness had called, having heard her speaking. Frances replies that everything is fine, and when she turns back toward the figurine, she sees it motionless in its original position. Frances then believes she must have been drugged with something, but when she approaches the object, she notices marble dust scattered around the Venus. The figurine really had moved.

Convinced by the miracle she has just witnessed, Frances is determined to get out of her confinement at any cost, so she has the Maltese summoned and asks to be escorted to her father. Her

intention is to feign goodwill toward the Baron and everything concerning him, in order to buy time and hope for another miracle. Once she reaches Sir Monroy, she appears repentant for her behaviour up to that day and promises to comply with the Baron's wishes, provided she is allowed to return to her work and the construction of the greenhouse continues. Her father feels reassured by his daughter's decision. Monroy tells her she is now free to go wherever she wishes and asks John to inform the Baron of the news. The Baron immediately sends a telegram to Father Corso, telling him that Frances is once again well-disposed toward catechism and that he may return to Erice. The next day he receives the Jesuit's reply, announcing his imminent return.

At the camp, Joe finds Father Corso packing his bags and asks where he is going. The priest replies that he must return to Trapani for another catechism lesson with the future Baroness Frances Monroy di Sant'Anna. As he speaks that name, Father Corso notices a strange flicker in Joe's eyes and therefore asks him to accompany him, since he is not yet ready to set foot on the battlefield again. Joe agrees—perhaps a little too quickly, in the Jesuit's estimation.

They return to Trapani at dawn. Upon entering his residence at the college, Father Corso asks Joe to inform the Baron that the lesson with Frances will take place in the afternoon and that he himself will come up to the castle.

Frances, even now that she is free, keeps watch over the road leading to Trapani, hoping to see Joe returning. That evening she waits until late at night, then Miss Schmidt convinces her to go to bed. A few hours later, just after dawn, Joe returns to the castle and brings his horse to the stables. The servants

are called to prepare his room. The Baron, already awake because one of his men watching the harbour has informed him of Joe's arrival, has him summoned to his chambers at once. After reading that confidential dispatch from London, he is eager to know what Joe has discovered about Father Corso. Joe, after reporting the Jesuit's message, recounts the soldiers' strange reactions, the substance dissolved in the tea, and Father Corso's unsettling ease with medicinal compounds. The Baron, thoughtful, dismisses Joe, who goes off exhausted to sleep.

Alone in his office, the Baron understands: his men had already informed him of the imminent departure of large shipments of aquavit which, from the diocesan warehouses, were to be sent to Catania and distributed to the Garibaldian troops before the assault on Messina. To the Baron, everything is clear: Father Corso intends to spread his substance among the soldiers, hoping that, driven to violence, they would lose international support and, meeting strong resistance on the other side of the Strait, be defeated at Messina. His plan is therefore at risk of collapsing. He must speak to the Jesuit immediately and settle the matter.

Frances wakes a few hours later, unaware of Joe's return. A message awaits her when she rises, and she reads it with a heavy heart: that afternoon Father Corso will come up to Erice to resume catechism.

Scene 5

When Father Corso arrives at the castle, the Baron is waiting for him, with Frances beside him trying to mask her displeasure.

The Baron asks the Jesuit to speak in private before the lesson. It will not take long. So the priest tells Frances to wait for him in the library, where he will join her shortly. The Baron orders Miss Schmidt to escort her there and then leave her alone in the room.

In his office, the Baron reveals to Father Corso that he has understood his plan and the means he intends to use to carry it out. Cornered, the priest confirms the Baron's suspicions and lays out his entire scheme. The Baron reassures him. If the Company intends to sabotage Garibaldi's enterprise to prevent him from marching on Rome, then the effort is pointless. Even if Garibaldi wished to conquer the Eternal City, the Piedmontese themselves would stop him. The matter has already been arranged by the Baron personally together with the English Freemasons. And as for the fall of the Catholic kingdom of Naples—if that is what the Church wishes to prevent—there is something the Jesuit does not know: it is true that the Bourbons will go into exile as kings, but they will return in triumph as emperors. The Baron lays out his vision for the Italy of the future and proposes an agreement. First: the aquavit destined for the Garibaldians is not to be altered, and Garibaldi must be allowed to advance as agreed. Second: Father Corso and the Society of Jesus will supply him with the Chinese opium he needs, and he, in turn—after overthrowing the House of Savoy and creating a Catholic empire—will leave the Pope sovereign over Rome and its surroundings, since the capital of his imagined empire will be Naples. Father Corso likes the idea, and the two seal a pact. He will not dilute the substance into the aquavit, and Garibaldi will pass through Messina and reach Naples, but he will go no further. One problem remains. Father Corso needs a failed, fugitive Garibaldi in order to persuade him to go to China

and lead the rebellion the Company is directing. The triumphant liberator Garibaldi the Baron envisions would never accept such an offer. Once again, the Baron tells him not to worry. Garibaldi is no longer needed to resolve the Chinese impasse. Soon, in fact, he will come into possession of the last imperial seeds of Da Hong Pao. Father Corso is taken aback at these words, for he knows the value of those seeds. And that is not all, the Baron adds. The future Baroness, with her studies in tea and gardening, would be able to make them flourish and establish a plantation right here in Sicily. A plantation that would make the Sant'Anna family immensely wealthy. But since the Baron knows those seeds are far more useful to Father Corso and to his cause, he declares himself willing to part with them and grant the Jesuits ownership of the seeds, as well as a fertile portion of Sir Monroy's lands in India, making the reverend fathers of the Society of Jesus the sole managers of the plantation to come. Father Corso would be able to use that precious tea as a weapon of propaganda against the Emperor. If the Taiping possessed it, they would have the right to claim the throne of the Celestial Empire, and China would stand with them.

The only remaining issue is that the seeds are currently in the hands of Joe Styles, who is also conspiring with Garibaldi to push on toward Rome. To seize them, it will be necessary to dismiss him—perhaps by sending him back to London in a coffin—but he must be eliminated with extreme delicacy, since he is, after all, a British officer. Father Corso promises he has the solution and that he will take care of it.

When the meeting is over, Father Corso leaves the office and heads toward the library. As he walks, he reflects that even if he has been forced to negotiate with the Baron and alter his plan, at least the Pope and Rome are safe. The seeds of that imperial

tea, and the revenues from its production, are an unexpected gift—and one that fits perfectly into the success of the rebellion. Yet the Taiping still lack a commander capable of leading them to victory. And after repeating the reasoning countless times, the conclusion is always the same: only Garibaldi can win that war and take Beijing.

Father Corso needs a miracle to bring Garibaldi to his side, and that miracle will be granted to him by Saint Gennaro in Naples.

Scene 6

Frances, left alone in the library—a place she usually avoided because she often found the Baron there—loses herself in admiring its beauty, and feels drawn to one side of the room in particular: the only one not well lit. She walks toward the dim corner, where the temperature mysteriously drops. A painting fills her with a peculiar sense of dread. The portrait shows an old man with an austere gaze, completely devoid of emotion. He looks a little like the Baron, she thinks, and at that very moment a book falls on its own from a nearby shelf. Curiosity leads her to pick it up. The book is light, bound in brown leather, and on the cover a coiled serpent seems to stand guard over it. Frances suddenly remembers that it is the same book she had found resting on the bench in the park. And the serpent on the cover is the same one that bit her that night, causing her all that pain.

She opens the book, and on the inside cover she finds the portrait of a beautiful woman. Suddenly the image stirs and rises out of the page in the form of tiny particles that gather into a kind of three-dimensional hologram. Frances asks her name, but the woman replies that it has been lost over the centuries.

What remains is the title the people of Erice gave her when she was still alive. Everyone called her the Bellina. There was no man, in those days, who did not fall in love with her, but she had given her heart to a soldier who had come from the sea. Their love lasted only one summer, for the lord of Erice—the man who was Baron at the time—interfered. Since she was the most beautiful woman in the whole of the Trapani region, he had decided to make her his wife. Her resistance was useless and in vain. The man was rich and powerful, and her family could do nothing but consent to the marriage. When the Baron discovered the relationship between the girl and the soldier, he used all his influence to have the young man driven away from the island. Before leaving, the soldier gave her a ring, promising to marry her upon his return.

The footsteps of Father Corso in the corridor leading to the library—and, before that, his voice as he takes leave of the Baron—interrupt the vision, and Frances, white as a sheet, snaps the book shut. The little figure of the Bellina is sucked back into its pages. Frances longs to reach the end of the story, but she must postpone it. So she decides to take the book with her. She slides it under the chair and immediately covers it with her long skirt.

Scene 7

When Father Corso enters the library, Frances is seated at the table, leafing through a Latin prayer book. The Jesuit's interminable lesson is interrupted near the end by agitated noises coming from the courtyard. Father Corso steps outside to ask what is happening, and it seems that one of the horses

in the stables has gone wild. He returns to the library and tells Frances what occurred, emphasising that it is Styles's horse that is acting up. Frances, who still did not know Joe had returned, is delighted but tries to hide her joy. Father Corso dismisses her and goes to see Joe to examine his wound. Before the Baron or any of his men arrive to close the library, Frances unlaces one of her knee-high boots and pulls out the string. She ties it tightly around the spine of the book, then fastens both ends to the metal hoops that support her skirt. The large, voluminous underskirt will prevent anyone from seeing the book or the loosened boot. She reaches her apartments and hides the book in the drawer of a desk, covered with a cloth.

After the Jesuit's visit and a bit of rest, Joe goes out into the garden to check on the greenhouse and is surprised not to find it completed. He spots Frances there, discussing with the Maltese how and where to resume the assembly. Joe steps in as the supervisor of the previous work. He learns that construction was halted for a week by order of the Baron, but that Frances has now been allowed to resume it. The direction of the work, however, has been entrusted to the Maltese. In that moment, Frances is distant and deliberately ignores Joe.

Frances remembers clearly the meeting she had with the Baron that morning. He had summoned her to his study and told her that the time had come to speak plainly. Their marriage, for the Baron, is nothing more than a commercial alliance with Sir Monroy, and if it were not for Frances's beauty, he would not even take pleasure in showing her in public. He wants only male heirs and a façade marriage to display in society. What irritates him, therefore, is not that he has noticed her interest in another

man—who is, moreover, a simple soldier. Frances blushes, betraying herself openly before the Baron, who continues.

What drives him into a rage is that she is not cooperating in ensuring the success of the wedding. If her behaviour did not change—first and foremost by beginning to ignore that Joe—he would have him killed. And he would do so with impunity, because he is a Sant'Anna, a friend of the king, and no one would lift a finger against him. The Baron is bluffing, because before killing Joe he must obtain the Da Hong Pao seeds; but Frances does not know that Joe has the seeds, nor that the Baron is aware of their existence, and she takes the threat seriously.

Her change of attitude—and, if Father Corso confirms her participation in catechism—will allow her to finish the greenhouse. But as a strictly preventive measure, from that moment on Joe will no longer be the coordinator of the work. First, because Styles, until he is fully healed, must rest, since he is to command the British Legion and Garibaldi is waiting for him for the assault on the mainland. Second: in about a week, he will leave Erice and never return.

Scene 8

From that day on, the few times they meet, Frances is cold and distant with Joe and tries to avoid him in every possible way. Even with her eyes. He finds her behaviour incomprehensible and tries to speak with her to find a plausible explanation, but whenever he comes across her, the Maltese or one of the Baron's men is always with her, preventing Joe from even approaching.

One evening the Maltese has to leave in great haste. A fire in one of the Baron's grain warehouses requires his intervention.

Joe takes advantage of the moment to try to reach Frances. After dinner, she often takes a long walk in the park. Joe hides in the vegetation, and when he hears her coming, he steps out and pretends to be out for a stroll. Their paths converge, and Frances sees him walking toward her. When Joe is standing before her, she realises she cannot avoid speaking to him: she does not know how to dismiss him, and deep down it is the last thing she wants to do. They greet each other and linger, knowing they can stay there only a few minutes before someone notices. Joe asks her about her change of attitude toward him. She replies that the Baron ordered it, and that she is doing it only for his sake. The Baron, in fact, threatened her that if she did not obey, he would give the order to have Joe killed.

Frances looks for a way out of the conversation—one that does not exist—but at a certain point she finds herself forced to reveal herself, after glancing around to make sure no one is there to hear or see them. Overwhelmed, she answers bluntly that even the last fool walking down the road has realised she feels something for him. Joe, seized as if by a force, steps toward Frances and kisses her. She lets him for a moment, then pushes him away when she hears noises in the park. Frances composes herself and resumes her walk, happy, as though nothing had happened.

5

Act 5 - Back to the battlefield

Scene 1

Frances's reading of the book she took from the library progresses slowly. The Bellina has not reappeared from its pages, and so Frances must read the entire text herself. The problem is that the book is written in two languages: Turkish in Arabic script, and Latin. Frances's Latin is rather rudimentary, but the text is still within her reach. She waits for nightfall to read it, and for even Miss Schmidt to be asleep. When everything is quiet, Frances goes to the desk, takes out the book, and, with the help of a dictionary, translates it bit by bit. The dictionary comes from the library of the Jesuit college in Trapani. She borrowed it under the pretext of using it to better understand the words of the Catholic liturgy.

Yet the book has very little that is Catholic about it. It was written in the first person by the great-grandfather of the current Baron. A lithograph on the frontispiece confirms to

Frances that the man portrayed in the library is indeed him. The book recounts in detail the crimes the Baron and his men committed against the girl and her soldier-lover. The book is also enchanted—if not outright cursed—because after holding it in one's hands for a certain amount of time, the viper on the cover comes to life and tries to bite the reader. A true mystery. If on one hand Frances is terrified by this sorcery, on the other she is eager to understand the whole story, and so every night she resumes her work, taking care not to be bitten.

One night, after hours of intense reading, Frances falls asleep in her chair but is awakened shortly after by a dull thud and a scream from Miss Schmidt. Frances, opening her eyes abruptly, sees the book thrown to the floor and the viper standing upright, emerging from the cover and hissing at her menacingly. Miss Schmidt, terrified, explains that she had picked up the book to tidy the reading table and had placed it near the lamp. When she was about to put it back, she heard the hiss of a snake and saw the leather reptile come to life. At that point she knocked it to the ground with her feather duster. Frances then understands that the viper is activated by heat. The warmth of the hands holding the book brings the serpent to life, as does placing it near a source of heat. In this case, the viper is alive and well because the book was warmed by the lamp's flame. Frances opens a window and exposes the book to the cool night breeze. Within minutes, the viper returns motionless to its original position. Miss Schmidt, trembling, warns Frances that on the night she fell ill, the Baron forbade anyone from reading that book. Frances asks her not to speak of what she has seen and promises to put the book back as soon as possible. In the nights that follow, she begins turning its pages using the chopsticks Joe made for her.

The book is dated 1734. Frances has researched that period. In the early 1700s, the last Habsburg king dies and the throne of Spain is left vacant. A total war breaks out, even in overseas territories, involving all the major European powers. The conflict drags on until 1713, when the Peace of Utrecht is signed. From those treaties, Sicily ends up in the hands of the House of Savoy. In 1720 the Savoyards barter the crown of Sicily for that of Sardinia, and Sicily passes under Austrian control, just as the Kingdom of Naples already was. Then, in 1733, the Kingdom of Poland is left without an heir, and another war of succession erupts, involving, among others, France, Spain, and Savoy against the Holy Roman Empire, Russia, and Austria. England is not involved in that conflict, and its naval forces simply monitor the situation. In that same year, the Kingdom of Naples is invaded by the Spanish-French and Savoyard troops commanded by Charles of Bourbon, who defeat the Austrians. Then, in 1734, it is Sicily's turn. After conquering the island, Charles is crowned King of Sicily in Palermo in 1735 under the name Charles III. He appoints as his viceroy the Baron's great-grandfather, one of the men closest to him and the one responsible for the final expulsion of the Habsburgs from the kingdom.

The book, written in the first person by Diego Carillo de Santa Ana himself, recounts that the viceroy was seeking a local bride who would cement his bond with the land and strengthen his power over it, but he did not want one of the many noblewomen of that decadent former kingdom. He wanted a woman who would truly impress the Sicilians, and the only one capable of doing so was the doctor's daughter—the one whom the people of Trapani and Erice called the Bellina. Everyone agreed she was the most beautiful and captivating woman in the Mediterranean. After seeing her and visiting her home several times, the Baron

tried to buy her with flowers, gifts, property, money, but she always refused his proposals. At first, that refusal seemed inexplicable, especially since her family did everything they could to persuade her to accept.

During one of his attempts at courtship, Santa Ana notices that the girl wears a ring on her finger, and after some investigation by his men, it is discovered that it is a token of love given to her by an English lieutenant of the Royal Navy. The Baron, exploiting his diplomatic contacts, manages to have the lieutenant transferred to Naples.

The viceroy then sends his men to Naples and, on an evening of shore leave for the English officers, the lieutenant is kidnapped and immediately brought back to Trapani. To the salt pans. There Diego Carrillo awaits him. The nobleman is wearing his ceremonial armour because, shortly afterward, he is to take part in the parade held in his honour for the ceremony of his appointment as viceroy of the island. The Baron removes one of the heavy gauntlets and strikes the lieutenant across the face with it; the man absorbs the blow. Santa Ana spits on him while the soldier's face becomes a mask of blood. Then he has him beaten and whipped repeatedly until, exhausted and barely conscious, the viceroy runs him through with his sword. But not before forcing him to swallow the ring he wears on his finger—the twin of the Bellina's. Then Santa Ana has him beheaded and orders the body, weighted down, to be thrown into the sea, where it will become food for fish.

After the parade of honour, Santa Ana, with the macabre trophy in his possession, has the girl kidnapped and brought to the castle of Erice. The Bellina is chained, and the viceroy himself shows her the severed head of her beloved. The girl weeps and despairs, but continues to refuse the nobleman,

declaring she is ready to die in order to join her lover in paradise. Santa Ana obliges her and ends her life by piercing her heart.

Up to this point, the text is in Latin. Then begins a series of pages written in Arabic script, and the book concludes with something that looks like a floor plan, with a clearly visible seal in one corner: a viper, drawn in the same style as the one on the cover. But Frances has no way of deciphering the rest of the text, as she does not know the alphabet of the language in which it is written. Moreover, the final lesson with Father Corso is approaching, and at that point she will have to return the book. Nevertheless, before giving the manuscript back, Frances makes an exact copy of the floor plan and the seal.

Scene 2

A few days after the night of the kiss between Joe and Frances, the work on the greenhouse is finished. Now it is only a matter of arranging the interior, as the camellias from London are only a few days away from arriving in Trapani. The Maltese—who, by order of the Baron, will follow Joe and join the Garibaldians—prepares for departure, discussing the situation with Joe. The Garibaldian troops, now in control of Sicily, will complete their enterprise once they have taken Messina and attempted the crossing of the strait to land on the Italian mainland. Two major obstacles await them. Messina, as the last Bourbon stronghold on the island, is well defended; and it is uncertain how the people of Calabria will receive Garibaldi. It is not guaranteed that the Garibaldians will be welcomed with open arms; indeed, it is quite

likely that those communities will mount strong resistance, as happened in the past with poor Pisacane. Garibaldi's success is far from assured.

Joe follows the rapid succession of events feverishly, thanks to the various couriers who are sent to the castle almost daily to bring news and updates on the ongoing military campaign. For political reasons, the Baron receives dispatches from all over Sicily, while for military reasons Joe is kept informed directly by the British Legion, forcing the two of them to meet regularly to exchange information. Through this, they maintain contact with the commanders in the field and, in particular, with the Masonic brothers—English and Italian—who negotiate tirelessly with the Sicilian and mainland elites so that Messina may be abandoned without excessive fighting and the crossing of the strait may be eased for Garibaldi. After what happened with Frances, Joe detests the Baron, but as a soldier he is forced to cooperate with the man, as ordered. The Baron, for his part, displays impeccable aplomb toward him.

Shortly afterward, during his final return to Trapani, Father Corso, after Frances's last catechism lesson, examines Joe's shoulder and declares that his recovery is essentially complete, even if the pain will take a few more weeks to disappear entirely. He can now return to battle. The Jesuit tells him that this is the last time they will see each other at the castle. The lessons with Frances are over, and Garibaldi has already landed in Calabria. Father Corso says he must leave at once to reach the Garibaldians as soon as possible. There is a steamer leaving Palermo that evening. When will Joe rejoin the Legion? Joe replies that he must prepare some papers and coordinate with the Maltese, but they will depart shortly. They say their farewells, and Father Corso takes his leave.

Joe and the Maltese decide to depart after the camellias have been unloaded and brought up to Erice. The day after this final stage of the greenhouse assembly, they will both board the same ship that transported the camellias and which, bound for Venice, will stop in Calabria to set them ashore. Within a couple of days the ship arrives, and the Maltese organises a long convoy of carts to bring the pots and plants to the castle. Frances can hardly contain herself at the sight of her camellias and personally supervises their transfer. Her excitement masks the sadness stirred by Joe's departure and the fear of never seeing him again, should he be killed in battle. By evening the transport is complete, and the plants are temporarily arranged haphazardly inside the greenhouse. Frances will place them properly in the days to come. The Maltese, his work finished, bids Frances farewell and goes to prepare his luggage. Joe, instead, is still in the cistern, where he has spent the entire day sorting papers, documents, and offensive plans after burning in the palace boiler all the correspondence and material no longer needed. But there is another matter Joe must settle before leaving Erice: the Da Hong Pao seeds.

Scene 3

Sitting at his desk in the now-empty cistern, ready to be abandoned, Joe weighs the different alternatives. The first option is to give the seeds directly to Frances. Convinced that Frances has read the letter, Joe assumes she knows of their existence, knows that he is the one who possesses them, and imagines

she understands their immense emotional value. They are seeds soaked in the blood of his men and of his closest friend. Without that cursed attack on the plantation, they would have been nothing more than a botanical rarity obtained as spoils of war. In that case, Joe would have given them to Frances so she could enter some botanical competition, where she would have been granted a stand in the English pavilion at the next world exposition, or simply to plant them as she wished.

Knowing Frances—her altruism and her love of botany—she too would have given them away for research purposes, and that tea would have been planted everywhere, erasing its value. The Chinese would not have taken it well, since a tea reserved exclusively for the imperial household would suddenly become commonplace in teapots around the world, but what could they have done in retaliation against the British Empire? Probably nothing.

But that night at the Taku Forts the only plantation of that tea—already the rarest in the world—was destroyed, and so now its preciousness goes far beyond the whims of aristocratic horticulture. Even if Frances kept silent about their origin, once the seedlings took root it would not take long before someone realised what those shrubs truly were. First among them Sir Monroy, being one of the largest tea merchants, in constant contact with international experts.

If Joe has understood Frances even a little—Frances, who knows the story and the value of those seeds—he is willing to bet that, possessing such a treasure, she would try to defend it from the greed of anyone who took an interest in it. Even from her father. Joe cannot bring himself to imagine Monroy harming his daughter, but ambition and wealth blind even the wisest of men. And those seeds could make Monroy lose his mind. If her

father, in order to obtain those plants, were to confine Frances to some convent of nuns in the Sicilian interior, Joe would never find her again.

In the worst-case scenario, it would be the Baron who wanted those camellias; he would marry her and then have her declared insane, shut away in a wing of the castle and kept in lifelong seclusion, like in those novels by that Austen Frances loves so much. In Sicily—or even in a future Kingdom of Italy—no one would oppose the Baron or interfere in his family affairs, and Frances would find herself forever imprisoned by a sadist.

And then there is Father Corso, who knows China well and defends the interests of the Church to the point of wanting to overthrow a pagan empire to create a Christian one, preferably Catholic. He is perhaps the only one of the three with the greatest interest in those seeds, because he is capable of bartering them directly with Chinese warlords, rebels, or the authorities in Beijing. Those Camellia seeds are the passport to the religious, cultural, and perhaps even political future of the Celestial Empire.

Frances is Protestant, not yet converted, and therefore, in the eyes of all Catholics, an unrepentant heretic resistant to conversion. Father Corso could bring her before the Holy Office in Naples—the old Inquisition—and have her excommunicated. Under the laws of the Kingdom of Naples, Catholic excommunication is punished with detention until repentance in the prison of Santo Stefano on the small island of Ventotene. The prison is a fortress from which escape is impossible, and access to it is restricted to a handful of high magistrates. Once locked inside, after endless abuse and violence, Frances would likely be eliminated by those two Chinese cutthroats Father Corso calls seminarians. Monroy and the Baron, devastated by the loss,

would soon be consoled by the enormous profits guaranteed directly by the new Most Catholic Emperor and his Cardinal Primate—Father Corso himself. Perhaps this is precisely what the Jesuit is aiming for.

The second possibility is to reveal to Frances the hiding place of the seeds, but he would have had to beg her not to touch them at least until his return. And if he did not return, Frances would never resist the temptation, and she would get herself into trouble. This too, then, is a dead end.

Joe shakes his head and opens a secret drawer in the desk, from which he takes a metal plate, embossed in gold and silver and folded onto itself like a ring. He sits on the mattress and begins turning it over in his hands.

Scene 4

Joe's mind goes back to when he first obtained that plate.

In his life he has never been particularly interested in plants, gardens, or seeds, but he knows a few things. His knowledge is general, the kind shared by almost everyone, because nearly everyone works a piece of land and regularly plants something. Since seed preservation is among the simplest notions of botany, those same notions proved useful once he received the seeds from the Mandarin and, even more so, after the destruction of the plantation at the Taku Forts. At first, to protect them, Joe kept the tea seeds in their original container: the pocket of an embroidered silk scarf folded onto itself. He kept them safe inside his backpack for the entire duration of the war. Then, while wandering across China, they remained in his travel bag, and eventually they returned with him to England, inside a trunk,

and were later stored under glass in a dry place. From time to time, Joe let them air out, preventing them from rotting. In his first days in Erice he carried them with him in his jacket; then, once things calmed down, he hid them in a crevice of the Garibaldian hideout. In the rooms beneath the statue of Venus Joe spent a great deal of time, and so he could guard them directly, but in the long term it would have been far too damp an environment to preserve them.

Since the Baron is also the most powerful man in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the absolute master of the castle, it is clear that his residence is full of prying eyes and ears, and sooner or later someone would have discovered the seeds. Joe could not leave them in his room, because the Baron might order his maids and valets to rummage everywhere in the guests' chambers and belongings to spare himself unpleasant surprises. On the other hand, Joe could not leave the seeds in the cistern, because that area of the castle would be turned upside down once he left with Garibaldi and abandoned Erice.

During the first weeks of his stay in Erice, one of Joe's priorities was to explore the underground tunnels that branch out from the castle all the way to the edges of the Trapani countryside. Their entrances are barred by heavy iron gates, for which Joe has the keys, and they are covered in vegetation that hides them from sight. These galleries, with their packed-earth floors, are common in feudal castles, because in the event of a siege they guaranteed a route of escape. The Baron—an astute feudal lord, a nobleman, and a prudent man—kept the tunnels in excellent condition and restored those that had collapsed or become unsafe over time, thus preparing himself against an unlikely revolution.

The underground spaces consist of galleries that follow the path of one of the old hydraulic conduits, whose original core is an ancient Roman cistern. Its main reservoir, restored and paved with stone, is also Joe's Garibaldian office. To reach it, one must use an underground staircase located near the statue of Venus which, according to the Baron, originally stood in a nymphaeum fed by the water of that cistern. Each gallery begins at a round shaft, topped by a manhole that can easily be opened and removed even from below, with an iron ladder, and it emerges near the main areas of the castle: by the stables, in the main courtyard, next to the washhouses, and so on.

All the galleries begin in the same way, reach the cistern, and then branch out again toward the outside, crossing one another several times before finally separating. All except one. This last one is also accessed from the cistern, but through a much lower opening that forces one to crawl, and it is blocked halfway by an old rusted grate that Joe has learned to remove without damaging it. The passage is nothing more than a ventilation shaft, and it opens into a more recent gallery, slightly wider than the others, which never intersects with any of them and is the fastest route to reach the outside. But Joe does not possess the key to the gate used to enter it, and what is even stranger, it begins with a square shaft closed by a heavy metal cover that seems unwilling to open. Who knows in which wing of the castle it emerges.

Joe does not know the castle well. There are rooms, wings, and entire floors where he has never set foot, or where he has passed only rarely. Only when Garibaldi visited the castle did the Baron show some of the palace's restricted areas.

Scene 5

One of the off-limits rooms of the palace is the armory hall, an immense chamber at the center of the main building, its walls lined with flags, weapons, and suits of armor that retrace the key stages of Sicilian history: from Arab scimitars and daggers, to long Swabian halberds, to Spanish helmets and greatswords. When the Baron shows them to the general and his entourage, he lists them one by one, taking pleasure in lingering over the Island's military past as a way of introducing his guests to the centerpiece of the collection, displayed in the middle of the hall.

Set upon a platform and illuminated by a massive chandelier, the suit of armor of Diego Carrillo de Santa Ana towers above everything else. The armor is unique in its kind: entirely decorated, edged in gold and silver, a piece of goldsmithing of the finest craftsmanship. Garibaldi is captivated by it, as are Joe and the others.

Next to the armor stands a heavy cotton-padded vest, topped by a comical hat typical of southern Spain called a montera. On one of the walls hangs the stuffed head of a large bull, which seems to wear a sorrowful expression.

The Baron explains that if the armor is of incredible workmanship, its story is even more incredible. It was a personal gift from King Charles to his great-great-grandfather Diego Carrillo de Santa Ana for having been the true conqueror of Sicily. It is no coincidence that he was appointed the island's first viceroy. Without him, forcing the Austrians to surrender would certainly have been far more difficult, and for this the sovereign had been grateful to him from the very beginning.

That is how it happened.

At the end of August 1734, two Spanish contingents land at Taormina. The troops of the Infante of Spain advance without encountering strong resistance, except in Messina under Prince Lobkowitz and in Syracuse under Marquis Orsini. In these two strongholds the Austrians hold out for more than six months before surrendering. The Spanish advance toward the western part of the island continues without meeting significant opposition. Only Trapani remains impregnable, refusing to surrender.

Charles of Bourbon wants to finish the conquest of the island quickly, as the military campaign is extremely costly, but that city not only resists: it receives ammunition and provisions by sea thanks to English and Maltese smugglers. It is commanded by Count Andrea Carrera, long in service to the Habsburgs. Count Carrera was born in Vienna into a noble Lombard family, though the Carrera lineage has Spanish origins. The family had moved to Spanish-ruled Milan at the beginning of the seventeenth century and had gradually Italianized, but strong ties remained with its various Spanish branches. From childhood, Count Andrea spent long periods with his relatives in Málaga, where, like every young scion of an Iberian noble family, he was taught the ancient and noble art of tauromachy.

Weeks pass, and the city still refuses to surrender despite the heavy siege. Every day Trapani is bombarded by Spanish artillery, while food and water begin to run short. Carrera knows he has little time left before he will be forced to capitulate. The situation remains at a standstill for a while, then Charles of Bourbon sends Carrera an ultimatum demanding immediate surrender; otherwise the city will be razed by bombardment and, once the gates are breached, the Spanish army will put every inhabitant to the sword, turning Trapani into a ghost

town. Carrera searches for a way out to save his men and the civilian population. Observing from one of the towers of the city walls, Carrera recognizes through his spyglass Diego de Santa Ana among the besieging forces. He is much older now, but Carrera remembers him from childhood, when he and his Spanish cousins had been taken to the court of Madrid for the birthday of a member of the royal family. On that occasion, the young Santa Ana had fought a bull before the entire court and, after killing it, had been acclaimed by the audience.

Carrera does not hesitate. In his study he writes a message and summons a military courier, entrusting him with the mission of delivering it to the besiegers' camp. From one of the towers on the city walls a white flag is waved, signaling that a diplomatic messenger is coming out with a proposal. From the opposing camp another white flag rises in acceptance.

In the message, addressed to Santa Ana, Count Carrera challenges him to a duel in the form of a bullfight to be held within a week in Trapani's fish market square. The square is shaped like an arena. Each of the two toreros would have five banderillas with which to strike the bull. The first to use them all would then earn the honor of delivering the final blow. If Carrera won, he and his men, armed, would leave Trapani unharmed and be re-embarked without incident for Genoa or Marseille. Furthermore, once inside the city, the Spanish troops would refrain from looting as punishment for the subdued population. If instead Santa Ana won, the Austrians would surrender and be treated as prisoners of war, allowing Vienna to be asked for ransom payments. In addition, the Spanish would be free to impose extra taxes on the people of Trapani to repay the costs of the war and the siege. The audience in the arena would be composed half of Austrian soldiers and half of Spanish soldiers,

all unarmed. On the day of the bullfight, one of the city gates would be opened to allow Santa Ana and two of his attendants to enter, along with the escort of soldiers serving as spectators. To Charles of Bourbon, the agreement seems satisfactory. Santa Ana declares himself ready to fight.

On the day of the bullfight, Santa Ana and his men arrive punctually for the appointment. The gate opens at their passage, and the procession moves through the city's streets, which are deserted. The people are shut inside their homes, terrified, and from behind their shuttered windows they watch with dread the parade of their soon-to-be masters who, once in control of Trapani, will show no mercy to the population that resisted them more than any other in Sicily.

The unarmed soldiers, Austrians and Spaniards alike, take their places on the stands set up around the square for the occasion. A roar rises from the arena when the two toreros make their entrance. They approach each other with their assistants and shake hands. It is noon, a hot May day, and the Spanish soldiers refresh themselves with water they have brought in barrels from their camp. Trapani, under siege, has its aqueducts cut off, and most of the city's fountains have run dry.

With a thunderous crash, a giant bull bursts furiously into the arena. The two toreros each receive their first banderilla and face one another. A furious duel ensues, the two men using their banderillas like swords to hinder each other. Santa Ana lands the first strike, then Carrera scores two in a row, then Santa Ana again, but Carrera immediately answers with another double and is left with only one banderilla. Santa Ana tries every possible way to stop him, but in the end Carrera prevails and plants the final banderilla. The bull is his.

Carrera draws his sword, ready to deliver the killing blow.

The enraged beast takes a long run-up and charges at him, while Carrera waits with his blade poised. When the bull is almost upon him and the torero is about to strike, a gunshot rings out. The bullet hits the bull in the head, killing it instantly and sending it crashing to the ground.

Caught off guard, Carrera does not understand and turns to demand an explanation from Santa Ana. He does not have time to fully turn before Santa Ana drives a banderilla into him. At that moment the Spanish soldiers pull out muskets and pistols that the supposed water-carriers had secretly distributed during the bullfight. The Austrians have no escape. Laughing, Santa Ana orders his men to open fire. A hail of bullets cuts down every last Austrian soldier. Drunk on the blood of his enemies, Santa Ana commands his men to throw open the city gates and invite the rest of the army to enter and carry out a total sack. Thanks to Santa Ana and the sack of Trapani, Charles of Bourbon ended that war richer than he had begun it.

Garibaldi notes that the Baron seems to take pleasure in recounting this tale of cowardice, dishonesty, and treachery — but also of power and ruthless dominance. Quite normal for an old-style aristocrat. But the new Italy Garibaldi envisions will not be like that.

And that is why, the Baron concludes, Diego Carrillo de Santa Ana was named a Baron of the realm by Charles of Bourbon, granted ownership of the Castle of Erice, which had belonged to Carrera, and entrusted with the operational post of Viceroy of Sicily.

As he listens to the Baron, bored, Joe has an idea. What better secret place to hide the seeds than in plain sight? The hall would be a perfect hiding place if only it weren't inaccessible. In fact, for security reasons, it is kept locked every day, and one may

enter only with the key held by the Baron or one of his butlers. As they are leaving, Joe notices, well concealed in a corner, a trapdoor in the floor secured with a bolt. The hall is on the ground floor, and the hatch is square and the same size as the one he found barred in the underground passages. With the Baron and the others turning their backs to head toward the door, Joe approaches the trapdoor, pretending to admire the bull's head on the wall more closely, and with a quick kick he loosens the bolt before hurrying after the others.

That same night, Joe descends into the hideout, removes the rusty grate, and follows the tunnel from the barred entrance. He climbs the iron ladder and tries to lift the hatch, succeeding. The trapdoor is so well hidden that not even the cleaning woman has noticed the bolt out of place. As soon as he emerges, in the dim lantern light, Joe recognizes the Armory Hall and understands that the passage he has just used is the escape route for the castle's owners — which explains why it is the largest, the shortest, and does not intersect with the other tunnels. Joe moves quickly toward the display case at the center of the hall, removes the glass, and pulls from his pocket the old Mandarin silk scarf in which he had placed the seeds. He slips it inside the gauntlet and takes a pair of pliers from his pocket. By forcing the metal of the gauntlet a little, he manages to remove a plate from the base of the ring finger, then reassembles everything so that the missing phalanx cannot be noticed, and closes the case again. Returning to the trapdoor, he oils the bolt so it will slide smoothly through the locking rings. From another pocket he takes out a large magnet salvaged from a broken compass he found in the Monroy warehouses. He slips back into the

trapdoor, uses the magnet to snap the lock shut, and the hatch closes easily. Joe fastens the magnet to the base of the iron ladder and returns unseen to the cistern.

Scene 6

With only a few hours left before he sets off, Joe has no time to waste. He goes down to the cistern and, using a few tools, widens the metal plate and shapes it into a ring for Frances. She, being an intelligent woman, will notice that the ring has the same decoration as the armour and will realise, by looking closely at the gauntlet, that this is where the metal of the ring comes from. But Frances has no access to the armoury and will only see it on special occasions—and not anytime soon—so it will take her a long while before she becomes curious enough to examine the display case and discover the seeds, trying to plant them. But by then it will be too late, because Camellia seeds lose their vitality after three or four years. Joe has had them for more than two years already, and they are approaching their limit. If he did not return from Campania, by the time Frances eventually found them it would already be too late. She would no longer be able to make them germinate, and so she would be out of danger.

Satisfied with his plan, Joe closes his fist around the ring and heads to the greenhouse, now ready to be put in order. He cannot give the ring directly to Frances, because the Baron would notice and would go back to the gauntlet in the armoury, and therefore to the seeds. So, to make sure she finds it, he must hide it somewhere Frances is certain to look—yet where no one else would put their hands. At the beginning of their acquaintance, Frances told Joe that the camellia she cares for the most is the

green camellia, which is also the ugliest. The fact is that it was the first camellia she ever planted, and therefore the oldest in her collection, as well as one of the rarest specimens she owns. When the plants were shipped, Frances had insisted repeatedly with both the sender in London and the ship's captain that they take particular care of that flower. It is a rather small plant, potted in a container of rough white porcelain. Using a small shuttered lantern so that no light can be seen from outside, Joe goes to the camellia and, with great care, lifts the block of soil in which the roots are planted and slips the ring beneath it. Then, with a quick strike of chisel, he cracks the porcelain and widens the fracture so that a little soil spills out. Sooner or later Frances will notice and look inside the pot. Then he extinguishes the lantern and heads to his room. In the morning he must rise early.

At dawn there is great activity in the castle for the departure of the Maltese and Joe. Waiting for them in the courtyard are their horses, saddled and armed, and the luggage cart. The Baron bids Joe farewell for the last time, since his role in Erice and in Sicily has come to an end, and he urges the Maltese to watch the young Englishman's back. The Maltese, in private, has already received his instructions: he must discover where Joe keeps the seeds and then kill him. Frances is not there, and this saddens Joe. But he knows it could not be otherwise. Perhaps she is at some window, but he does not dare look for her, afraid the Baron might notice. Frances, in fact, is at one of the palace windows, but she hides behind a curtain of drapes so as not to be seen. Her eyes are full of tears. She fears that with Joe, her life is leaving as well.

6

Act 6 - Fireworks for Gennaro

Scene 1

Joe and the Maltese land in Calabria. The journey and their conversation take on a friendly tone, even though the Maltese knows he is not there to protect him but to recover the seeds and eliminate him. To reach Garibaldi, who is already encamped in Campania near Battipaglia, seventy kilometres south of Naples, they need two days on horseback, and during the ride the Maltese tries to keep the conversation flowing in the hope of extracting some information from Joe. But Joe reveals nothing.

As soon as they arrive at the camp, Garibaldi himself comes to greet Joe, mindful of the debt he owes him, and tells him that, given the reasons for which he was decorated with the medal for valour in China, he must entrust him with an extremely delicate mission, similar to the one at the Taku Forts. A commando of selected soldiers is to infiltrate the port of Naples and sabotage the cannons of the two war frigates stationed there to defend

the harbour entrance. It is a necessary operation, because once the Garibaldians enter the city, the commanders of those ships could open fire, hindering or blocking the occupation. At the same time, the two fully operational frigates would delay, with cannon fire, the arrival of ammunition and supplies from the sea. And they would not surrender easily. If, instead, they found their cannons out of action, it would be easier to force their crews to yield. Joe accepts with great difficulty, remembering the nightmares of China, and he is fully aware of the responsibility and the importance of such a mission.

Joe begins drawing up a list of possible commandos, consulting the opinions of various officers. Whether the men are English or Italian makes no difference, because John the Maltese will be with him and will act as interpreter. While Joe studies maps and the access and escape routes of the city and the port, Garibaldi urgently gathers the entire Garibaldian staff and summons Joe as well. He must announce that Piedmontese diplomacy has leaked the news that the Bourbons of Spain, in order to defend their cousins, have sent two warships loaded with men to Naples. The Spanish fleet will arrive within days, so Joe's mission changes. The two Bourbon frigates must be blown up, because once sunk on the spot, their hulls will block access to the harbour and the Spaniards will be unable to land.

Father Corso, who is present at the meeting because Garibaldi has promoted him to the rank of major as head of the expedition's medical services, proposes that the mission be entrusted solely to the British Legion and that the Italians be kept out. Amid general confusion, Father Corso explains that ecclesiastical sources have informed him that a merchant vessel flying the flag of the Papal States is anchored in the port of Naples. In reality, it is a ship of the Vatican navy on a mission for the pope.

Its task is to escort Francis II and the Queen out of Naples upon the arrival of the Garibaldians, because the king has decided not to spill unnecessary blood in the city, and therefore, when Garibaldi arrives, he will already be gone. The two frigates will not follow the sovereign but will remain there to defend the arrival of the Spanish ships and allow them to enter the port and land their troops. Everyone in the room knows that fighting the Spaniards through the streets of Naples would be a bloodbath for soldiers and civilians alike.

To disable the frigates, Joe and his men would dress in Papal army uniforms and enter the city under the pretext of serving as an armed escort to the vessel. Only Englishmen are needed to make the disguise credible, since most Papal troops are Irish Catholics and speak English. Father Corso would go with them, making the story even more convincing, not only because he is a priest, but also because he can produce a forged document—complete with sealing wax similar to that of the Vatican chancery—ordering the ship's captain to take the soldiers on board as an escort and place himself under their command. The ship would serve as a safe base for the raids on the frigates without arousing suspicion. Garibaldi and the other officers agree with the Jesuit and order the plan to be carried out.

Joe, who knows Father Corso's cunning, wonders whether some trap lies behind his proposal. Still, he cannot refuse orders. Father Corso sets the tailors and cobblers of Battipaglia and nearby Eboli to work producing fake Papal uniforms with such fidelity of detail that they could deceive even a Roman. The forged papal letter, falsified directly in the Vatican according to Father Corso's precise instructions, is delivered to the Jesuit by a nun sent from Rome.

Scene 2

Before proposing the mission to Garibaldi, Father Corso had secretly informed the Vatican Secretariat of State that, in order to deal with Garibaldi once and for all so that he would never again threaten Rome and the Papal State, he needed a pretext to enter Naples before Garibaldi himself. And he had given precise instructions. In fact, long before Garibaldian intelligence was alerted, the Baron, through an ecclesiastical courier, had warned the Jesuit that Francis II, despite having agreed to abandon Naples, intended not to make the city's capture easy. The sovereign had been adamant that Garibaldi must face the Spanish relief troops. The Baron had been unable to refuse the king. He asked Father Corso not to underestimate the Spanish factor and the risk that the Garibaldian advance—so far triumphant thanks also to secret agreements—might meet fierce resistance, enough to endanger even Garibaldi's life and the outcome of the enterprise, or even push Garibaldi toward Rome before returning to Naples. The Baron proposed preventing the situation from slipping out of control and ensuring that Garibaldi did not get strange ideas. Therefore, the frigates had to be sunk to prevent the Spaniards from landing.

The Baron knew of the royal decisions because, while Garibaldi was arriving in Battipaglia and establishing his headquarters there, he himself had travelled by sea from Trapani to Naples and had requested an audience at court. Received at the palace, he had explained to the sovereign his project for the conquest of Italy and how the Bourbons would benefit from it. Naturally, the Baron had glossed over the opium and his plan to intoxicate Italy, since the sovereigns would have been utterly opposed and

would have stopped him immediately. In those delicate hours for the Bourbon monarchy, his speech rekindled Francis II's hopes. The Baron advised the royal couple to maintain appearances and play along, acting the part of temporarily exiled rulers. They were to leave Naples, take refuge in Gaeta, and then move to the Papal court. A Vatican ship was already in the harbour, ready to take them to the fortress of Gaeta. In Rome they would be safe, because he was already in agreement with Father Corso—Vatican plenipotentiary in the matter—that once Naples was taken, Garibaldi would not reach Rome. And he will not. Even if he wished to, the Freemasons would stop him first. For the royal couple, the option of taking refuge in Spain or France, where other Bourbon relatives ruled, was less advisable, because the people of the kingdom would feel the absence of their sovereigns, would feel abandoned and betrayed, and such a gesture would undermine support for the monarchy. By remaining in Rome, they would still be close to their former kingdom. Francis II agreed with the Baron.

Scene 3

As soon as the first redshirts appear on the horizon, the sovereign secretly boards the Vatican ship and has himself taken to Gaeta with his family, where he takes residence.

In Gaeta, which lies less than three hours by sea from Naples, the commander of the Vatican vessel finds a Jesuit waiting for him with service orders signed by the Cardinal Secretary of the Navy, instructing him to return to Naples and await further commands. The Jesuit also hands the captain a sealed packet containing confidential instructions. These state that a Jesuit,

escorted by soldiers posing as Irish troops, will present himself at the port of Naples with an obviously forged letter of orders. The captain is to take them on board and place himself under the authority of the Jesuit and the detachment commander. Thanks to favourable winds, the Vatican ship quickly returns to Naples and docks before the Garibaldians arrive — as if it had never left.

The commando of British legionaries, Father Corso and his entourage are taken aboard a fishing boat which, sailing off the coast of Naples, drops them north of the city to give the impression that they have disembarked from a vessel coming from Papal territory. They land at Castel Volturno and enter Naples through the Pozzuoli area. The access routes to the city are controlled by barricades manned by Bourbon soldiers. As soon as the soldiers see the detachment, they order them to halt, aiming their rifles at them. Some are ready to fire, alarmed by the fear that they might be Garibaldians, even if they do not look like them. Father Corso then steps away from the group. Unarmed, with his hands visible, he approaches the platoon commander. He intones a "Praised be Jesus Christ," to which the officer replies before asking who they are and what they want. Father Corso explains the situation of the Papal vessel and that they are the escort sent from Rome to protect it from the Garibaldians and to bring the royal family to safety. Finally, he shows the papal order. The non-commissioned officer, unaware of the sovereign's escape, hesitates, but seeing the seal of Saint Peter, the soldiers' uniforms, and convinced by the presence of a priest and other monks, believes him and lets them pass.

Once inside the city, they head to the harbour and present themselves to the Vatican vessel. From the quay they call for the captain, and Father Corso asks permission to come aboard. Once

on the ship, as planned, Father Corso presents his papers, and the commander places the vessel under the authority of him and Joe. At that moment, on Castel dell'Ovo, which stands before the harbour, the flag of the Two Sicilies is lowered and the Italian tricolour is raised.

Scene 4

The city is in a state of great excitement. Not only because Garibaldi is at the gates, but also because the feast of Saint Gennaro falls on the weekend, and every Neapolitan family is preparing to celebrate the event. Flowers and candles multiply on the street altars, flags and carpets bearing the saint's image are displayed, and people crowd shops and markets. But the fireworks display is the topic everyone is talking about. The mayor, expecting the General to arrive on Sunday, has moved the fireworks to Friday evening to ensure they take place. Because if by Sunday the saint's blood has not liquefied, for the Neapolitans it will be a sign that Garibaldi has been rejected by heaven, and the conquest of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies could be considered a resounding failure. With the sacred blood remaining solid, Garibaldi would have the entire kingdom against him, and after the landing of the Spaniards, he would have no choice but to retreat to Sicily or even flee abroad. However, most believe that the rumour of reinforcements from Spain is only a rumour, and that Garibaldi has the saint's favour. Therefore, for Sunday evening, the Neapolitans expect a second fireworks display.

The two frigates guarding the harbour are anchored to special piers that close and fortify the stretch of water in front of the

city, and a small boat is needed to reach them. They are close enough to the quay, but there is no way to assault them directly from land. However, since the best place to watch the fireworks is the harbour, those piers, instead of being closed and guarded, remain open to the public. During the night, crowds will gather there to watch the display, surrounded by every kind of stall and street vendor. In such chaos, it will be easy for Joe and his men to approach the frigates. Moreover, most of the soldiers and crew will be on leave that night, and the officers will all have dinner invitations from families in the wealthier districts. The ships will therefore be left with a minimal crew and under the command of a single petty officer. No one — not even during the almost successful revolution of '21 — has ever dared to attack a ship of the Royal Navy, and thus, according to the Bourbon high command, it will not happen this time either, even with the Garibaldians in control of the city.

In examining all possibilities, both Joe and Father Corso identify Friday evening as the most suitable moment for the attack.

Garibaldi's approved plan calls for several men of the Legion to pretend to be drunk on the quay near the ships and, some dressed as Papal soldiers and others in civilian clothes, to stage a brawl. Police and Garibaldians will be kept away from that area of the harbour, so no one will intervene to stop the fighters. At that point, the small crews remaining on board the two frigates, seeing that the scuffle does not die down, will have to lower a boat and come ashore to calm things down and restore order. Meanwhile, two teams of two men each — one for each ship — will approach the vessels, protected by the darkness and covered by the noise coming from the shore, and will climb aboard. With the sentries' attention fixed on the quay, each group will make

its way inside and, once they find the powder magazine, will take a barrel of gunpowder, place it against the ship's side, prepare a fuse, and light it. The commandos will have very little time to escape, and once back on deck, if they want to survive, they will have to dive immediately into the sea. The explosion will be intense but not overly violent, because using only one barrel of gunpowder will not disintegrate the frigates. Instead, it will tear a breach in the hull large enough to sink the ships while leaving them as intact as possible. Only in this way will the two wrecks form the barrier needed to keep the Spaniards out of the harbour.

To handle the explosions on board, the Chinese seminarians are assigned to the task. Father Corso hastens to justify the choice by saying that the Chinese have handled gunpowder since childhood and are therefore better suited for the job. The seminarians will be accompanied by two volunteers: Sergeant Frankson, a quick and agile young man from York, and Private Sains, from Somerset, who has served in India as an artillery-man.

The commander of the Vatican vessel never takes part in the meetings with Joe and Father Corso. Officially, he must pretend to know nothing of what is happening on board. It is not the first mission he and his crew carry out for the Papal navy, and they know how to keep their mouths shut. This time, there is a bonus. The crew has orders to remain ashore for the entire day, and the men take advantage of it to wander through taverns and brothels, returning to the ship only late at night. From conversations in cafés and in the little shops of the alleys, it seems that no one knows the king and queen have left Naples. Enthusiasm is high for Garibaldi's arrival which, Saint Gennaro permitting, is expected to be triumphant and peaceful. Yet people say that two

large contingents of Spanish soldiers are on their way. If they manage to enter the harbour, someone speculates in a tavern, that part of the city will become hell. The captain, informed by his men of what people are saying in the city, decides that, despite his orders, on Saturday, with the afternoon tide, he will set sail for Civitavecchia.

Scene 5

At sunset on Friday everything is ready for the sortie. The crew of the Vatican vessel has already gone ashore and dispersed through old Naples, while the captain remains shut in his cabin. He knows that the priest and the Englishman are plotting something for the evening, but since he does not understand English, he has no idea what it is. He stays on board in case something goes wrong. He does not fear the Bourbon police or the military, because with the king out of the city, the kingdom on the brink, and Garibaldi at the gates, the public security forces are waiting to see who the real victor will be before choosing sides. No one will come looking for him, and even if they did, he is officially unaware of everything. He would simply blame the priest for deceiving him and walk away clean. What worries him is the risk of finding himself caught in the crossfire between the Bourbon navy, the Garibaldians, and the Spaniards with Naples in revolt — especially if the saint's blood does not liquefy. He has already told his sailors to be ready to cast off on Saturday with the afternoon tide, and they have agreed.

Joe and Father Corso gather the members of the commando and go over the strategy one last time. Father Corso translates. They will enter the water wearing leggings up to the waist and

sleeveless shirts that Father Corso has managed to have dyed black by some nuns, telling them they are garments for his seminarians. Each of the two teams will carry a waterproof bundle made of tarred cloth, containing the footwear to be worn on deck — padded with straw and scraps of leather to make no noise — a fire-steel to light the fuses, and a weapon: either a pistol or a knife. When everything is ready, Joe gives the order to begin the operation.

A rowing boat, steered by two men of the Legion dressed as fishermen, pushes off from the quay near the Vatican vessel, carrying the four raiders. From a distance it looks like one of the many groups of Neapolitans who, in their private boats, are moving toward the centre of the harbour to get a better view of the fireworks. But instead of choosing a comfortable spot among the other boats, this craft heads toward the darker, more shadowed part of the inner basin. From there, the commandos slip into the water. Meanwhile, on the pier closest to the frigates, people begin to gather in anticipation of the show. Little by little, the undercover English legionaries join the crowd and start shouting, pushing, jostling one another. Soon come the shoves, the insults, the threats, until the shouting escalates into a full-blown brawl. From the frigates, the sailors notice that a crowd of burly men on the pier is beating each other senseless. At that moment, all attention on board is fixed on what is happening ashore. Realising that no one is stepping in to stop the fight, one of the two petty officers remaining on the ships signals to the other with flags to send their men ashore to restore order. Two boats are lowered, one from each frigate, with a handful of soldiers who begin rowing toward the pier.

Scene 6

As soon as the boats carrying the Bourbon marines reach the shore, the commandos, waiting silently pressed against the hull, spring into action. The Chinese go first: with bare hands they climb up the side of their assigned ships and reach the deck. The deck lies in darkness, lit only by the distant glow of the festival lights. The Chinese tie a rope to the rail of each vessel and throw it down to the Englishmen, who climb aboard. The ships are even more poorly manned than expected. Only a few sailors remain on guard, two soldiers, and the petty officer who is watching the pier through his spyglass. As ordered, the commandos slip silently below deck, pass the two gun decks, and reach the heart of the hold where the ammunition is usually kept. In each powder magazine, after breaking the lock, they take a small barrel of black powder to serve as the charge, and a long cannon fuse to insert into it.

The fireworks of Saint Gennaro begin. With the loud bursts and the crowd's eyes turned skyward, few hear or notice the explosion aboard one of the two frigates. One of the commando teams has succeeded and escaped in time. The soldiers on the pier, who have barely managed to restore order on land, notice nothing either. Only after a while do the Bourbon sailors realise something is wrong when they see the frigate's hull shattered and the ship slowly beginning to sink.

While chaos erupts on the damaged frigate, on the one still intact the guard detail levels their weapons, and the soldiers on shore hurry to return on board, all while being pelted with stones and objects thrown from the pier. The second ship has not yet blown up, because the two commandos have been delayed,

forced to hide when a soldier came below deck to go to his cabin. While the Chinese raider and Sains are still struggling with the lock of their powder magazine, they hear the explosion and understand that it is now too late to blow up their ship as well. Within moments the armed crew will be coming down to flush them out. They decide to flee. Sains draws his pistol, and the Chinese takes up a long knife.

The two petty officers in command on the ships are at first confused. They initially think some kind of accident has occurred, then realise that one of the frigates is taking on water. It is now clear that they have been the victims of a terrorist attack. The petty officer on the intact frigate begins to suspect that there may be saboteurs on board his ship as well, so he draws his revolver and rushes below deck, followed by the soldiers with weapons in hand.

On the first gun deck, the Bourbon soldiers and the two Garibaldians face each other. One of the soldiers fires a shot, wounding Sains in the leg, while the Chinese raider throws his knife from a distance, striking the petty officer in the heart. The soldiers fire a few more shots, but their old muskets are inaccurate and miss. They then charge the attackers with bayonets. The Chinese fighter blocks one of them, grabs the musket, twists it, disarms the soldier, and strikes him in the abdomen with his own weapon. Meanwhile, Sains, with his pistol, kills the other.

Above them they hear the pounding of boots and shouted orders. The soldiers who had gone ashore are back on board. On Sains's instruction, the Chinese raider releases a cannon from its safety clamps and shifts it aside, then throws himself into the sea through the gunport — but not before signalling to Sains to follow him through the opening. Sains drags himself to the port

and glimpses the Chinese fighter beneath the ship, motioning for him to jump. Sains has no choice and hurls himself into the void. As he sinks, unable to move his wounded leg, he feels hands grabbing him and pulling him back to the surface. It is his Chinese companion, hauling him up and carrying him on his back as he swims away.

Behind them, the fireworks burst magnificently, greeted by the applause and shouts of the crowd. The noise is so great that the people do not even notice the sound of the bullets fired uselessly at the fleeing men by the soldiers on the intact frigate.

7

Act 7 - Naples Awaits

Scene 1

On the very morning of Joe's departure, Frances goes to the greenhouse to begin tending to the camellias. When she sees that the pot of the green camellia is broken, she lets out a cry. How could those brutes of carters have smashed the pot of her most precious plant? Without losing heart, she grabs another pot and prepares it for repotting. But when she lifts the camellia with its clump of soil, she is astonished to find a ring at the bottom of the pot. She sets the plant in its new container and examines the ring. Still puzzled, she notices a J traced in the topsoil of the green camellia. Only Joe knows how attached she is to that plant. She no longer has any doubt: the ring is a gift from Joe. With great care, she slips it into her hair, making sure to hide it so it cannot be seen.

A few days later, Carmignano arrives at the castle bringing news from Naples. He goes straight to the Baron to report on the atmosphere in the city on the eve of Garibaldi's arrival.

After finishing his meeting, Carmignano passes by the greenhouse and, seeing the door open, decides to take a look at the completed work and pay his respects to the baroness. Frances welcomes him politely and, in the course of their conversation, asks him about the book he had been reading the night he found her fainted in the garden. Carmignano replies that he does not know much about it. He did not even read it in the end. The fact is that he was in the library, and that volume seemed almost to want to leap off the shelves. That is why he chose it. He did not know at the time that the book is strictly forbidden and that one needs the Baron's personal permission even to hold it.

In confidence, Carmignano tells her that he has asked around among the servants, and it seems that everyone knows there is a ghost in the castle, and that the book, according to some rumours, contains the way to set it free. And granting freedom to the spirit is precisely what every Baron of Sant'Anna does not want to do. Who knows why. The information sets off many alarms in Frances's mind, but she does not let it show. She then asks how the Maltese is doing, hoping to learn something about Joe as well. Carmignano's reassuring answer about John gives her hope for Joe too. If he had been killed or wounded, he would have told her. As a person, Carmignano does not strike her as malicious, even if he is the Baron's trusted administrator.

In the two days following Joe's departure, his absence weighs heavily on Frances, and she feels a tightness in her chest. Hoping to revive even a fragment of memory, she wishes to enter the cistern. So she goes to the Baron and asks permission to use the space and turn it into a nursery for plants. The Baron

sees nothing wrong with the idea and asks Carmignano to show Frances how to enter and exit from beneath the statue of Venus. Frances makes a show of carrying pots, soil, and tools downstairs, but in truth she is searching for something of Joe's. Yet the shelves are empty, as are the drawers: everything has been removed. Then a dull thud — and suddenly a hidden drawer springs open. Inside are a few sheets of blank stationery and a pencil. Frances notices that the top sheet still bears the faint imprint of the last letter written on it. She darkens the page and can read the part of Joe's letter — the one never delivered to her — where he speaks of the seeds and of the fact that he possesses them. For Frances, it is a shock. She had no idea he was the fortunate keeper of those seeds. He must have them with him, she thinks at first. But then she convinces herself that it cannot be. In war, Joe could have lost them, and he would never have taken such a risk. And those seeds are a gift for her. They must be in Erice, somewhere.

Scene 2

In those same days, Frances notices that the Baron is extremely busy and that a constant stream of people enters and leaves his office. Then she realises that preparations for the wedding are in full progress. The Baron has her summoned to inform her of the wedding schedule. The marriage ceremony will be held in the cathedral in Naples immediately after the miracle of Saint Gennaro. The wedding banquet, instead, will take place in one of the Sant'Anna family's villas in Campania, specifically in Castellammare di Stabia. The villa has already been renovated and its furnishings enriched. Carmignano has taken care of

everything. The wedding will be celebrated by Father Corso who, before performing the marriage, will carry out Frances's Catholic communion and confirmation. The date has already been set with the ecclesiastical authorities: it will be the 19th of September. Frances does the calculation and mentally notes the few days left before the execution of her sentence. The wedding dress is almost ready, and the tailor's shop in Trapani that is making it will soon ask her to come for a fitting. The Baron then dismisses her, telling her that he is leaving for Naples, where he will monitor the political situation and complete the wedding preparations. Monroy will go with him, as there are still many documents to sign to finalise the commercial and matrimonial agreement. She will remain in Erice for a few more days until Carmignano tells her when to depart, and together they will join the Baron in Campania. Frances feels the water rising to her throat.

In the afternoon, a convoy of carts and carriages carrying the Baron and her father heads toward the port. Frances is now alone on the estate, though under the watchful eye of Carmignano and the household servants. There are rooms in the castle and entire wings of the building where she is not allowed to enter. All the staff have strict orders not to let her go anywhere she should not. The Baron has been very firm about this.

Scene 3

The day after the Baron's departure, a delivery boy brings word that the wedding dress is ready for its fitting and invites the Baroness to come to town. Frances goes down to Trapani but, although the dress is splendid, she feels no desire to celebrate.

To comfort her, Miss Schmidt suggests taking a walk through the centre and finding a good pastry shop to indulge in a few sweet treats.

As they walk through the streets, Frances is struck by the symbol carved into the doorframe of a workshop. It is the same coiled viper glaring menacingly at the viewer from the cover of Bellina's book. She decides to go in and ask. Inside she finds a forge in full operation, one that looks rather ancient. From the furnace emerge glowing metal bars that an elderly man is ready to pull out. When he notices Frances, he immediately leaves his work and pays homage to the new Baroness. Everyone in town knows who she is.

Frances asks him what this place is. The blacksmith replies that today it is a mechanical workshop, but centuries ago the building was the Trapani residence of a Turkish diplomat who was said to be an occultist and, above all, a great alchemist. And it seems that in these very rooms the Turk had his secret alchemical laboratory. They are only legends, the old man insists, but people say the magician was able to create mercury seals that, when activated, could come to life. Frances, hardly believing her ears, asks him many questions, but the old man cannot answer. He does, however, know someone who might have the information she seeks. His name is Don Cirillo, though in Trapani everyone calls him Don Citrullo. Frances mentally translates the nickname into English and understands the joke. In Italian, *citrullo* means "fool" or "simple-minded."

Don Citrullo was once a Jesuit father at the town's college and a great scholar of local history and traditions. Then, a few years ago, he was suddenly reduced to the lay state and expelled from the order. Rumour has it that he came into possession of compromising documents about some powerful local nobleman

and intended to reveal them. But these are only the town's whispers. In any case, if anyone in Trapani knows the detailed history of the alchemist, it is him. Don Citrullo lives on the outskirts of town in a dilapidated shack and survives by giving occasional Latin lessons or by writing and reading letters for the illiterate. But he would not manage without the charity of the townspeople. Frances thanks the blacksmith and steps outside.

Frances enters a pastry shop and buys a tray of pastries. Then, with Miss Schmidt, she returns to the carriage and asks the coachman to take them to Don Citrullo. The driver is puzzled, but Frances explains that, as she learned in catechism, it is important to perform acts of charity, and since she had been told of this poor man in need of help, she felt it her duty — as a new Catholic and soon-to-be baroness — to pay him a visit. The man finds no objection and takes the two women to the former priest, even though he lives in one of the poorest and roughest parts of the city. They find him sitting on a stone outside his shack. Don Cirillo is astonished to see the Sant'Anna carriage stop right in front of his home, and even more surprised to see the future baroness step down. Frances hands him the parcel of pastries and asks him to let her inside. The man, bewildered, leads the two women in. Inside there are only a few furnishings: a rough table, a rickety chair, a three-legged bench, and a straw pallet. He sets the parcel on the table, but when he opens it, he discovers that on top of the pastries lies Bellina's floor plan with the viper seal. Frances, who always carried the map with her, had arranged for the pastry chef to place it inside the package. Don Cirillo is frightened and thinks it is a trap, but Frances reassures him and tells him what she knows. Calmed, the man begins to speak.

Scene 4

A few years earlier, as the leading local scholar of Trapani's history, he had been summoned by the city administration to reorganise the municipal historical archives. While leafing through those papers and putting them back into chronological order, he came across an incredible story concerning the Sant'Anna family. It was in an old folder belonging to the court guard. It contained the deposition that Bellina's father had given to the judges about his daughter's fate. Unable to accept her disappearance, he had begun investigating on his own, gathering evidence and testimonies about the tragic end of his child.

Frances already knows how Bellina died, but she does not know the context or the details. Don Cirillo explains that in those documents he found the confidential testimony of one of the Baron's servants, who recounted that when the girl was kidnapped she was taken to the castle's armoury, which at the time was undergoing renovation. They chained her to one of the scaffolds and tormented her for hours, desecrating the severed head of her beloved before her eyes.

Another set of papers contained a reconstruction of what happened afterwards, pieced together through years of investigation. According to Bellina's father, when his daughter once again refused to marry, declaring that she wished only to join her beloved in paradise, the Baron responded with a coarse laugh. He then had a strange man in Turkish-style clothing brought into the room. It was Emry Kaplan Effendi, Ottoman consul in Palermo and a well-known scholar of occultism and witchcraft, especially alchemy. The man, who kept a second residence in

Trapani and was in the city for the Baron's installation ceremony as governor, uttered strange incantations and performed various rites meant to soften and manipulate the girl's mind — but Bellina did not yield.

Then the Baron, in a fit of rage, killed her with his sword and asked the alchemist to imprison the girl's soul in the castle forever, preventing it from reuniting with that of her lover. The Turk had a large vat brought into the room and ordered it filled with wet lime. To the lime he added another substance he had synthesised from sulphur in his alchemical laboratory at his residence. The girl's body was lowered into the vat, which began to bubble. By the next day, no trace of Bellina's body remained. The Turk then ordered the walls of the room to be whitewashed with that same lime, so as to imprison the girl's ghost forever and bind it indissolubly to the castle's stones. He sealed the curse by having a viper made of mercury and meteoric iron set into a hidden corner of the floor, its gaze defiant and ready to strike.

A curious thing happened on that occasion. The girl's ring could not be found in the vat. Impossible that it had dissolved, the alchemist said, yet the ring was nowhere to be found. The Baron suspected one of the workers and had them tortured, but none of them had taken it. It had simply vanished into thin air.

Frances is horrified by such sheer barbarity. Don Cirillo adds that, to make the spell permanent, the Baron had to write in his own hand the reasons for that magical act in the pages of a diary, indicate the position of the seal that imprisons Bellina's soul, and have Kaplan Effendi close the book with several alchemical mantras written in Arabic. Once completed, the booklet was bound in an alchemical leather cover made by Kaplan in his laboratory, from which one of his serpents

emerged — a creature that awakened with heat and, with its bite, released a mercury-based poison capable of killing anyone within a few hours. It was the death that befell the doctor, Bellina's father.

After visiting a sick maid at the castle of Erice, the man had managed to slip into the library and retrieve the book. But while he kept it in the pocket of his coat, holding it with one hand so it would not fall, the viper awoke and bit him. The man died a few days later in excruciating agony. When the Baron learned of the doctor's attempt to pry into his secrets, he had Bellina's entire family imprisoned and then handed them over to Kaplan, who sold them one by one at the slave market in Constantinople. The girl's house, a pleasant little villa overlooking the sea, was razed to the ground, and in its place a pit for sewage and waste was set up.

Frances asks Don Cirillo why he fell into disgrace. Don Cirillo replies that, after finding the folder, he went to report to his superiors. What he had discovered was extremely serious. The patron of the Jesuit college was none other than the descendant of a mortal sinner — a heretic and apostate who had committed horrific crimes. According to canon law, the current Baron, in order to atone for such impieties, was required to present himself before the Holy Office in Rome and ask forgiveness on behalf of his family, compensating the victims of his ancestor's wicked and diabolical deeds. If he failed to do so, he would lose all titles and be excommunicated. But a few days after submitting his report, Don Cirillo received a *suspensio a divinis* and was then reduced to the lay state. They accused him of having forged satanic documents in order to blackmail an innocent and prominent family of the city. According to his superiors, Don Cirillo had shown, through that act, that he had

lost his reason and was no longer capable of administering the sacraments. The folder of documents that incriminated the Baron was burned by the bishop of Trapani himself. There is a reason, Don Cirillo says, for such zeal on the part of the religious authorities in defending the Baron. They know that if Bellina's ghost is ever freed, it will mean the end of the Sant'Anna dynasty — their richest and most important sponsors.

Frances would like to know more, but the coachman knocks on the shack's door and tells the Baroness that it is time to return home. The Baron could cause him serious trouble if he learned that he had taken the Baroness into the slums of the city.

Scene 5

When she returns to the castle, bitter news awaits her. Carmignano informs her that she has one week to prepare for departure. A telegram from the Baron has just arrived, ordering him and his future bride to embark in exactly two days. He will send a yacht to fetch them, courtesy of the British ambassador in Naples. They will reach Castellamare on the afternoon of Thursday the 16th, just before the patronal weekend.

In the days that follow, preparations for the departure are in full swing. Trunks of clothes, crates of food, the official silverware for the reception — everything must be packed and taken to the port to await loading. Carmignano, the man who holds the castle's keys, is overwhelmed with work, while Frances spends her last remaining days of freedom giving instructions to the gardeners on watering and caring for the camellias during her absence.

The night before the departure, between Sunday the 12th and Monday the 13th, Frances cannot sleep and decides to go down into the cistern to give a last farewell to her young plants and distract herself from the anxiety caused by her worry for Joe's life and the urgency of her wedding. She goes down with a lantern, and as she inspects the pots one by one — from which the first shoots of the *camellia sinensis* are beginning to emerge — she hears a strange creaking sound. The noise is constant, enough to draw her curiosity. A faint beam of light falls on a rusty, half-torn grate. Frances feels an irresistible urge to see what lies beyond. She removes the grate and steps into the tunnel, where she is struck by a strong scent of camellia. Impossible, since the only camellias down here have only just sprouted. She takes the lamp and follows the smell of the flowers. She finds herself in a maze of dark passageways, but she lets the fragrance guide her. After several turns she reaches the end of the tunnel and finds a metal ladder leading upward. Frances tries to understand where she is and looks around the base of the ladder. She notices a heavy round object attached to it. At first she pays it little attention and begins to climb. At the top, the scent of camellia is overwhelming. She tries to push the hatch, but it won't move. It is locked from above, probably with a metal bolt. Then she remembers the round object she saw at the foot of the ladder. She climbs down and realises it is a magnet. Perhaps Joe — or someone else — used that magnet to open and close the hatch from below. She climbs back up and begins to work the magnet along the wood until it catches the metal latch. The bolt slides free, and the hatch opens. Frances emerges into the armoury, shrouded in darkness. She recognises it because she had seen it during Garibaldi's visit to the castle, though she had never entered it again, as it was one off-limits for her.

She takes the floor plan from her pocket and, looking around, understands she is in the same room. The seal that imprisons Bellina is here. She identifies the exact spot on the floor beneath the display case containing the gauntlet of challenge. Frances gives the gauntlet no heed and begins to push the case aside. With some effort she manages to slide it far enough to reveal the seal. She brings the lamp close to the viper, which slowly stirs to life with the heat. At that point she pulls a mace from the wall and smashes the seal into a thousand pieces. The room suddenly floods with daylight, and from somewhere above an object falls, ringing sharply as it hits the floor. Frances realises it is Bellina's ring.

The light gradually fades, and Frances decides to put everything back in place so as not to be discovered. As she pushes the display case back, she notices that the decoration on the gauntlet looks familiar. She removes the ring from her hair and compares it under the lamp. The decoration is the same as on the ring Joe gave her. Looking closely, she sees that one of the gauntlet's plates is missing. Then she understands everything. This is why Joe gave her that ring and hid it beneath the green camellia. He wanted to show her where the seeds were hidden. Frances opens the display case and finds the small packet inside the gauntlet. She slips it into her pocket and restores everything to its place. She descends into the tunnels, closes the hatch, and returns to the cistern. With more calm she examines the seeds and finds them in excellent condition. She decides to plant some of them and leave the rest for a possible return.

Frances emerges just as day is breaking. The castle is waking up, and she hurries toward her rooms. She finds Miss Schmidt terribly worried about her disappearance and even more strained by the trunks still to be closed and the luggage still to be arranged.

Frances does not care. She is happy. And ready to leave.

Carmignano is the last to climb into the carriage after checking and rechecking the convoy of carts. He orders the coachman of Frances's carriage, which leads the procession, to set off. The night before, Carmignano had heard noises coming from the armoury and had stood outside the door without intervening. He had seen the light and heard the blows. Only Frances could have produced such a commotion, and only Bellina could have led her there. That is why he did not step in.

8

Act 8 - Two Minutes to Oblivion

Scene 1

On Saturday morning, Naples is in a state of feverish excitement. The next day the solemn celebration of the saint's miracle will take place in the cathedral, and the blood of Saint Gennaro, the city's patron, will be shown to the faithful. Whether it liquefies or not will determine the future of Naples, of the Kingdom, and probably of Italian unification itself. Throughout the city, bets are being placed on one outcome or the other, and the odds rise and fall constantly, driven by the frantic swirl of new rumours spreading everywhere.

Just as the sky was filling with fireworks the night before, news had spread like wildfire that the King and Queen had abandoned the city and taken refuge in Gaeta. At first the rumour was denied by the many royalists who still hoped to save the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, but in the hours that followed it received more than one confirmation. The surviving frigate, having

gathered on board its own crew and that of the sunken ship, raised anchor shortly before dawn and sailed away, leaving the harbour unprotected. For many Neapolitans, this was proof that the King had already left the city, since that frigate was supposed to escort the vessel he would take to depart from Naples. People remained at the port all night, and no one saw the King and Queen board that ship — or any other.

Meanwhile, at dawn, the various regiments still loyal to the Bourbons have received orders to withdraw from Naples and take position along the banks of the Volturno, just above Caserta. It is therefore not difficult to understand that the King is preparing to defend Gaeta, because that is where he now is. With the city completely undefended, and with no further risk that the Redshirts might be forced into an exhausting battle for control of Naples, word spreads from mouth to mouth that Garibaldi will enter the city that very afternoon, almost a full day ahead of schedule, and will install himself in the Royal Palace.

Yet the Spanish military reinforcements are extremely close, and by the next day — Sunday — they could already be in sight of the Campanian coast. Garibaldi and his men therefore risk being masters of Naples for only a few days. And then there is the uncertainty of Saint Gennaro. If the relic of his blood does not liquefy, the entire South will see in the failed miracle a divine sign that the Bourbons are the sovereigns chosen by Heaven, not that atheist Garibaldi nor those liberal Piedmontese. At that point, the populations of the kingdom would rise against the Garibaldians, overwhelming them or even massacring them. Garibaldi, then, would be forced to flee far away.

Scene 2

Aware of the risks and uncertainties of the moment, the general reaches the city at around eleven. After a long bath of crowds, he heads to the Royal Palace, where the general staff is summoned to assess the situation. Father Corso and Joe also take part in the meeting. Garibaldi first wants to know everything about the previous night, and then he wants to understand what scenarios now open for the Garibaldians. Joe lays out the situation.

No one knows exactly when the King and Queen left Naples, but it is almost certain that they have barricaded themselves inside the fortress of Gaeta. The Bourbon army is reorganising north of Naples along the Volturno, which, being the widest river in the kingdom, is the last major natural barrier before Gaeta and therefore an ideal place to establish a defensive line. But the garrisons that abandoned Naples to head toward the river will need a full couple of days to reach the rest of the army. This means they are still only a few miles from the city and can easily turn back. And they will, if the Spanish manage to land. Unfortunately, at the moment, there is no way to prevent the Spanish ships from entering the harbour. Before leaving, the Bourbon soldiers nailed down the cannons of both the coastal and land defences. And the cannons available to the Garibaldians are not suited for coastal defence. Once the Spanish occupy the port, it will be almost impossible to retake it without heavy losses for the Redshirts. Considering that the Bourbon army has nearly twice the numbers of the Garibaldians, if the latter were to exhaust their strength merely defending Naples, the Bourbons would easily defeat them on the Volturno. Not to mention that, with the port occupied, Naples would be unable to receive either

civilian or military supplies. With the Garibaldians barricaded in the city, the Bourbons at its gates, and the Spanish in control of the harbour, it is easy to foresee that Naples will sooner or later be besieged. Without ammunition and without food for themselves and for the entire population, they will all be forced to surrender within a few weeks — if not sooner.

And that is assuming the blood of Saint Gennaro liquefies. Otherwise, the Neapolitans themselves will drive out the Garibaldians and hand them directly to the King's army — likely already as corpses.

At that point, to get updates on the saint and his miracle, all eyes turn toward Father Corso, who is caught off guard. His thoughts, in fact, are elsewhere. The Jesuit, who had learned of the Spanish expedition only once it was already underway, had at first feared that the Iberian threat posed a danger to his plans. He worried that if Garibaldi lost the chance to take Naples, he would turn his ambitions toward Rome. But now that he knows a Bourbon army twice the size of Garibaldi's has entrenched itself along the Volturno, he understands clearly that the road to Rome is blocked for the Redshirts, and there is no way they can cross into Lazio. So the idea that a Catholic army might further hinder Garibaldi has now become, for him, an even preferable option. If his plan involving the relic failed, the Spanish would take care of ruining Garibaldi and pushing him into the Jesuit sphere of influence. If everything went smoothly, Father Corso and the general would be in China by mid-December. When his name is called a second time, Father Corso snaps back to the present and hastens to reply that no, the blood has not liquefied yet, but the bishop has assured him that all the signs indicate the miracle will occur the following day.

At that moment the Baron enters the room, to Joe's great

surprise, for he had not expected to see him in Naples. The Sicilian nobleman brings bad news. The Spanish ships had been sighted by the Piedmontese Navy off Sardinia a few dozen hours earlier, and therefore they have long since passed through the Strait of Bonifacio. By the next day at the latest, they will be in sight of Naples. They are under the command of Admiral Louis Enrique de Navarra y Castellon who, besides being skilled at sea, is a phenomenon in land assaults. He served for years in both Cuba and the Philippines as commander of the Royal Squadron, a special fleet tasked with combat operations and the eradication of piracy. For him, taking the port would be child's play. He commands two coal-powered frigates armed with cannons and a massive troop-transport steamer. Under him are about two thousand men — a devastating landing force. They must be stopped at all costs.

One of the officers asks whether the coastal defence cannons can be restored, but Joe replies that repairing them would take far too long, because the Bourbon artillerymen have smashed all the gun carriages, rendering the cannons unusable. They have also melted the lead from their bullets and poured it into the touch-holes, making them impossible to fire. Fixing them would require weeks. There is only one solution: closing the harbour by sinking another ship in place of the Bourbon frigate. The only vessel in the port of Naples with the right dimensions is the Vatican ship that Francis II was supposed to take to leave the city — and which, as far as anyone knows, he never boarded. Father Corso hides a smile. It is the same vessel the undercover Legion soldiers used as a base for their raids on the frigates. The problem is that the ship is due to sail in a few hours. The captain has informed him and Father Corso that, since the King is no longer in the city, his mission is complete and he does not intend

to risk his life or that of his men by finding himself in the middle of a battle. Father Corso, who in truth would prefer the vessel to leave, lies by saying he has no way to stop the captain. He has no valid pretext to do so, and forging a papal order would take far too long. Garibaldi cuts him short. Force must be used to seize the ship.

The Baron intervenes, pointing out that there will be no need for violence. Those sailors are Catholics — very Catholic. If they sail under the Vatican flag, it means they were selected by the Pontifical Navy, which chooses only the most devout. They will be flattered if they are given a place of honour the next day in the cathedral to witness the miracle of Saint Gennaro, one of the most renowned in Christendom. And if that is not enough to convince them, another card can be played. Immediately after the miracle, also in the cathedral, his wedding to Frances Monroy will be celebrated — and he adds, deliberately, that the future baroness has already been in Campania for several days. The sailors will be invited to the wedding banquet and will be free to eat and drink as much as they please. The Baron notes with satisfaction Joe's pained expression.

Joe is stunned. He cannot believe his ears. He is so shaken that he does not notice Nino Bixio, Garibaldi's second-in-command, speaking to him. The future deputy and senator asks Joe to take charge of the matter, even if he knows little Italian. The sailors speak and understand every language; they will understand him too. The Baron proposes that the Maltese accompany him — a former sailor himself — who can act as interpreter if needed. And he hands each person present one of the official parchments announcing his wedding and granting the right to attend the celebrations. There is one for Joe as well.

Joe leaves the room angry, confused, and humiliated. Out-

side the palace the Maltese is waiting for him, having already received the Baron's orders. Together they head to the port. On the ship, preparations for departure are in full swing. Joe and the Maltese ask to come aboard and speak with the captain, who is in his cabin. Once before him, they explain that the ship is needed for the Garibaldian cause. The captain replies that he already knows how they intend to use it — they will blow it up at the mouth of the harbour. Joe assures him that he and his men will be brought to safety and will all return to their homes. The captain refuses. If Garibaldi were defeated in battle by the Bourbons and their allies, or if the saint's blood failed to liquefy, once back in Rome he and his men would all be hanged for treason. And the odds, right now, are against the Redshirts. Therefore he will sail at the appointed hour.

As the captain is dismissing the Garibaldians, a loud commotion is heard on deck, as if someone important has come aboard. They go up and see Garibaldi addressing the sailors. He appeals to their Italian spirit, to the heroic virtues of the peninsula's people; he speaks of a future of wealth, development, prosperity, and international standing. All they have to do is hand over the ship.

The captain then, furious, steps beside the general and reminds his men that Garibaldi's is only one of the many revolutions that have broken out in southern Italy. The Bourbons will crush it sooner or later, as they have crushed all the previous ones. And the divine proof of Garibaldi's bluff is the saint's blood itself, which — though it is Saturday — has not yet liquefied, when normally it is already liquid by Friday. The sailors grumble, and many agree with their captain.

Garibaldi had foreseen this move. He asks Joe for his wedding invitation parchment and shows it to the sailors. The Baron of

Sant'Anna, one of the most important men in the kingdom and a great supporter of the cause, will be married the next day in the cathedral of Naples, with the blood liquefied. Would a man like that celebrate his wedding tomorrow, in the cathedral, if he were not certain the blood would liquefy? Everyone knows that otherwise it would bring misfortune. Therefore they can rest assured: the Saint will perform the miracle. Each of them will receive a place in the very front rows to witness it, and afterwards they are all invited to the wedding banquet.

A great cheer rises from the crew, who elect Garibaldi their new captain and threateningly order the previous one to disembark. Garibaldi asks the former captain to go with a patrol of Redshirts who will escort him to Castellammare di Stabia. For security reasons, it is the port chosen for the arrival of the wealthy wedding guests coming from all over the Two Sicilies, and it is therefore very busy at the moment. Moreover, the Baron has brought several catering ships from Sicily, so from there the captain will certainly find a vessel to take him back to the Papal States.

Scene 3

The sailors from Lazio, before leaving the ship with their belongings and settling in a small inn near the cathedral, are asked to help the Garibaldians start up the steam engine. Meanwhile, Joe and Garibaldi inspect the vessel to understand where to place the explosives. To blow up that ship, the hull must be lined with powder and guncotton along the bottom so that the explosion tears off the lower part of the hull, making it sink without destroying it entirely, leaving the wreck protruding

from the water and blocking the passage. The explosives will be connected to long fuses that run, emerging from the hatch, all the way to the bridge and wrap around the helm.

Garibaldi calls his aide and gives the orders. The Garibaldians immediately set to work. Father Corso, the Baron, and Carmignano also arrive on board to organise the mission. Garibaldi explains that the ship must be taken to the mouth of the harbour, the fuses connected to the explosives lit, and then the men must flee by throwing themselves into the sea on the side where they will later be recovered. The problem is that the fuse system does not guarantee proper functioning, and since the mission must succeed at all costs, if something goes wrong one of them will have to ignite the explosives directly — and blow up with the ship. And even if the fuses work, if the explosion behaves unpredictably and involves the boiler, the vessel will burst into a thousand pieces instantly, leaving no chance of escape for the commando. And the mission will fail.

While waiting for the ship to be ready and for the commando members to be chosen, the Baron — who delights in tormenting Joe — hands out sealed envelopes containing the official, personally addressed wedding invitations. The banquet will take place in Castellammare, where Frances is now. She and the guests will arrive in Naples by train, and all will return together on the same train. It is the only railway in the Kingdom; they might as well make use of it. The Baron also points out that his future wife insisted on writing the invitations herself in fine handwriting and personally sealed them with wax, using for the first time the seal of the Baronesses of Sant'Anna. There is an envelope for Joe as well. He takes it in his hand and thanks him awkwardly, then asks to be excused — he must go below deck to check on the work. Joe descends, trying to hide his

disappointment and bitterness, and only when he is alone near the hold does he open the envelope. He does not even have the courage to read the invitation, but something at the bottom of the envelope catches his attention. It is a small seed, and Joe recognises instantly what plant it comes from. It is a Da Hong Pao seed. Now that he knows Frances has already found the seeds, he realises that the pain of losing her — of knowing she is in the hands of that ogre — hurts him more than the panic explosions have always caused him. He no longer cares if he dies. Joe rushes to Garibaldi and volunteers to lead the mission.

Scene 4

The Baron had not expected this move. The mission is dangerous, and Joe might not return. Although the idea of seeing him dead does not displease him, the Baron needs Joe alive, because he still has to reveal where he hid the imperial tea seeds. He could insist that the Maltese go with him — John would extract the information from Joe before letting him die in the explosion. Before the Baron has time to reply, Father Corso proposes his own assistant to accompany Joe. Richie has served in the army and knows how to carry out a mission of this kind. Cold blood and great courage are required — qualities Richie does not lack. The Baron begins to object, praising the Maltese's abilities. A division forms among the group: some favour one, some the other. Father Corso asks the Baron to speak privately, and they go down to the captain's cabin.

The Jesuit intends to make Garibaldi fail and bring him to fight in China to secure victory for the Taiping. If this happens, everything will work to the Baron's advantage: he will have all

the opium he wants, at unbeatable prices. Is that not what he desires? The Baron is momentarily taken aback. Father Corso has understood his secret plan. The questions about China, about opium, about tea in Europe, the partnership with Monroy — it is obvious. If opium were to spread in Italy as it has in China, the people of the Peninsula would suffer the same indolence, corruption, and moral ruin that weakened even the Celestial Empire. Taking power in such an Italy would be child's play for the Baron. So if the mission fails, the Spanish land, and Garibaldi is defeated, little changes for the Baron. Officially, he will appear — together with the Church — as one of those who saved the Kingdom. The Two Sicilies remain as they are, and Garibaldi goes to China and takes Beijing. With Father Corso as imperial first adviser, central and northern Italy, within a few years, would be flooded with opium and soon ready to be conquered. In short, the Bourbon coat of arms would soon fly over Turin one way or another. The Church would thus defeat modernism, and if there are victims, they will be sanctified as martyrs of the cause.

The English, who have financed and supported Garibaldi to defend their interests in Sicily and the South, will not take kindly to a Bourbon victory and the defeat of their Masonic brother. The King will certainly retaliate against those who aided the Garibaldians, and many of them risk confiscation of their property and expulsion from the Kingdom. But with a China in Western hands, they would be compensated with trade licences that the Manchu Empire refuses to grant them. In short, they would be richly rewarded in Asia for the losses suffered in Italy. The Baron declares himself convinced of the soundness of the idea, also because the King would guarantee him the best of the confiscated English estates. The blame for the failed mission

will, of course, fall on Joe — who will conveniently disappear in the explosion of the vessel. Richie will take care of the task. His assistant has an old score to settle with Styles.

A slight lift of his interlocutor's eyebrow tells Father Corso it is time to play his final card. If it is the Dong Pao seeds the Baron is worried about, well, he knows who has them — and that person is no longer Joe. Styles has therefore become useless, if not outright inconvenient, for both of them. But for now, he cannot reveal the name of the holder, because it is a secret of the confessional. He takes out a small glass jar containing four seeds that look as though they have been dug out of the ground. The Baron, surprised by the Jesuit's shrewdness, now agrees to send Richie with Joe. The two return to the group above and announce their decision.

Father Corso has only recently learned that Frances has the seeds. The Jesuits are the only confessors authorised for the entire household of the castle of Erice. Before leaving Trapani, Father Corso instructed the castle confessors to pay particular attention to anything that had happened after Styles's departure. He is searching, on behalf of the Church, for rare seeds. Any reference to seeds must be reported immediately to the Rector. During confession, the priests repeatedly learn that Miss Frances, on the very morning of her departure, instructed some members of the household on how to water certain pots she had sown during the night. As penance for their confessed sins, in addition to the usual series of Hail Marys, the confessors ask that seeds be removed from one of the pots and brought to the college. The Rector, under the seal of confession, is informed of the latest developments and receives the seeds. He sends Father Corso both a written report of the matter and the small jar containing the sample seeds.When sharing some details of

his plan with the Rector the night before leaving, Father Corso had argued that if the confessors learned anything and passed it on to him, they would not be breaking the seal of confession. First, because this information was vital to thwart a terrible threat to the Church and to the future of Christendom. Second, because the revelations would pass from one priest to another priest who, once he had read them, would immediately destroy them. No secret or private matter would ever leak. The Jesuits of Trapani had followed his instructions.

Father Corso has been dosing Duncan with irocaine for days, sensing that Naples would be the perfect stage for Joe's assassination. An atheist — or at best a Protestant — libertarian, anti-clerical, that Joe had constantly interfered, sabotaging the Jesuit's plans and threatening the Church's designs. Eliminating him would be a benefit to everyone, and doing it in Naples would be the appropriate wedding gift to the Baron.

Duncan trembles with anticipation and cannot wait to act. When he is told that he has been chosen to go on the mission with Joe, he can barely contain himself. Father Corso invites him to come with him to confess before the mission. In this way, he will have the chance to instruct him on what must be done.

Scene 5

An hour later the artillerymen have finished placing the explosives, and the ship's steam engine is running at full power. It is time to set sail. Sailors and Garibaldians disembark, the moorings are cast off, and the vessel moves out. At the helm is Joe, who has received from the helmsman the instructions needed to bring the ship to its destination and stop it at the

chosen point. It is an easy manoeuvre and should present no complications.

When they are far enough from the pier that they can no longer be seen from shore, Duncan suddenly lunges at Joe and tightens a rope around his neck. Half-strangled, Joe loses consciousness and comes to moments later with a bucket of water thrown in his face by Duncan. Joe is tied to the helm, and the ship is about to reach the mouth of the harbour. From land, Garibaldi and the others wave frantically, unable to understand why the ship is not slowing down, and helplessly watch it pass the wreck of the frigate and head out to open sea. Duncan pulls back his hood and, with a grin, watches the look of disgust on Joe's face.

Duncan then reveals who he is, what happened to him, and how he is still alive. But he also spews at Joe all the slanders that Father Corso has been dripping into his mind over time. Joe, repeatedly punched and slapped, is torn between the joy of knowing his friend is alive and the disbelief at the sheer amount of lies Duncan hurls at him with violence. Joe speaks to him, tries to tell him the truth, but Duncan beats him mercilessly. Then he pulls from his pocket a small vial and drinks from it. Joe immediately recognises it as one of Father Corso's. Now everything is clear. After the trauma, Duncan has undergone the Jesuit's brainwashing, and the substance he is being given serves precisely that purpose. Duncan leaves Joe for a moment and returns with a box of phosphorus matches, with which he lights a cannon torch. With it, he will ignite the fuses and then save himself, while Joe will blow up with the ship — settling his debt with Karma. Duncan lights the fuses and returns to Joe to bid him farewell. He tells him he will not kill him himself; the explosion will do it, just as it was Joe's intention that the explosion at the Taku Forts should have killed Duncan.

Joe tries to shake his rediscovered friend and denies every accusation, placing the blame for these lies squarely on Father Corso. But the mere mention of the Jesuit — whom Duncan considers his saviour — drives him into an even greater rage. Furious, blinded by an almost animal anger, he prepares to strike Joe with a violent backhand when a gunshot rings out. Duncan, hit in the shoulder, collapses onto the lower deck beneath the raised bridge where the helm stands. It is Carmignano who fired. He rushes to free Joe, who demands to know why he did it and what he is doing aboard.

Carmignano reveals that his real name is Carminati. He is wanted by the Austrians for patriotic acts and has lived under a false name ever since. Though he has served the Baron for many years, inside he has remained a revolutionary — and from the assignments the Baron has given him lately, neither he nor Father Corso seems to want Garibaldi to triumph. And if they are plotting to make him fail, it is because they have something in mind far different from a united Italy. Therefore, as a patriot who dreams of national unification, distrustful of Duncan and aware of the vital importance of the mission, he hid aboard to ensure everything went as it should.

Carminati quickly douses the fuses with water; they have already burned halfway down and are almost at the hatch. Then he takes the helm, turns the ship around, and steers it toward the point chosen to blow up the vessel. When they reach the right spot, Carminati stops the engine and asks Joe to hand him Duncan's torch, which had fallen to the deck after the gunshot. From the hatch to the hold, the fuses will take only a few minutes to finish burning. They must be quick to throw themselves into the sea. Carminati lights another torch and passes it to Joe so he can help.

While they are intent on relighting the fuses, Carminati is struck by a knife that pierces the arm holding the torch. Duncan has recovered and, like a cyclone, has hurled himself at Carminati. The torch falls to the deck, and Duncan immediately snatches it up. Carminati, on the ground with his arm bleeding, tries to draw his pistol, but the difficulty of firing with his scarred hand slows him just enough for Duncan to kick him and send the pistol flying. Now Duncan, with the knife in one hand and the torch in the other, moves toward Joe. Joe, meanwhile, has grabbed Carminati's pistol and climbed onto the ship's rail, balancing himself on the ropes of the mainmast. Joe tells Duncan to stop — he is under fire — and offers him a chance to save his life. Perhaps two minutes remain before the explosion. There is still time for him to jump with them. Duncan hesitates for a moment, but then the irocaine takes over again and he refuses. He advances toward Joe, slowly but steadily. When Duncan reaches the area near the hatch, Joe shouts to Carminati to jump, and at the same instant fires at Duncan, who falls backward and, along with the torch, drops into the hatch.

It happens in a flash. A roar shakes the bottom of the vessel, and a tongue of fire rises from the belly of the ship. In an instant the blast sweeps across the deck, incinerating ropes, sails, and everything highly flammable. Joe, still in mid-air, feels the fire brush against him, but moments later his body and head are safely underwater.

9

Act 9 - A Bloody Affair

Scene 1

A rowing boat carrying a group of Garibaldians pulls Joe from the water. He is dazed by the explosion, slightly burned, barely conscious. Amid the churning waves and the frantic rescue, he tries to see whether Carminati—who dove off the opposite side of the ship—has resurfaced. But there is no trace of him.

Celebrated by the Garibaldians, Joe is brought ashore and immediately taken to the infirmary, where Father Corso is waiting. The Jesuit fusses over him, cautiously asking what happened to Brother Richie. But Joe, now fully aware that the priest is playing a double game, cannot reveal the truth. He speaks instead of Richie's heroism, his courage, his sacrifice. Yet inside, he seethes at the thought that this man has destroyed his dearest friend. Father Corso, who wanted Joe dead and the mission ruined, is visibly displeased. Once Joe's wounds are dressed, the priest excuses himself, claiming he must dine that

evening with the cardinal and the cathedral chapter on the eve of the Miracle of Saint Gennaro. Then he leaves.

Joe also exits the infirmary and asks for a horse, eager to reach headquarters and report to Garibaldi. As he trots through the city center, a group of street urchins surrounds him. They run alongside, shouting incomprehensible words. One of them uses a slingshot to knock Joe's hat off. The boys snatch it up, waving it mockingly in front of him. Joe spurs his horse, chases them down, accelerates, and grabs the thief, hauling him up onto the saddle. The boy returns the hat and tells him that a man from Milan is waiting for him at midnight at the port, near warehouse number 37. Joe immediately understands: Carminati sent the message. He slips a coin into the boy's hand, sets him back on the ground, and the urchins scatter into the alleys.

Scene 2

Meanwhile, Father Corso is in his room at the women's monastery of San Gregorio Armeno. He has been lodged there since his arrival in Naples, and it is the nuns of that convent who dyed the Garibaldian commandos' uniforms black. The papal bull naming him a pontifical envoy opened the doors of the community to him—though, of course, the choice of monastery was anything but accidental.

The nuns guard, in the crypt beneath their church, the blood of Saint Patricia, co-patroness of Naples. It liquefies every Friday and remains in that state only for that day; by the next morning, it has already solidified again. It is the saint's vial that interests Father Corso, and as soon as he settles in, he begins putting his plan into motion to obtain it.

Officially to thank the sisters for their hospitality, Father Corso serves as the monastery's chaplain: he says Mass, hears confessions, leads prayers, and even performs medical visits. Seeing him so devoted to the life of the community, the Mother Superior begins to trust him. On Thursday evening, she takes him to visit the crypt where the saint's blood is kept and asks him to officiate the liquefaction Mass the following day.

On Friday afternoon, a small crowd gathers outside the crypt—mostly women. Some are humble townsfolk, others are elegantly dressed, clearly belonging to the highest Neapolitan aristocracy. All wear a blue sash across their shoulder, fastened at the hip with a metal Sacred Heart brooch. They are the sisters of the Fraternity of Saint Patricia, the only laywomen permitted to witness the weekly miracle.

At the sound of a small bell, the Mother Superior arrives, followed by the other nuns. Behind them walks Father Corso in his cassock, with the two Chinese assistants dressed as altar boys. The Superior, the only one with the key to the crypt, opens the underground chapel solely on Fridays and only for the duration of the ceremony. The rest of the week, it remains sealed. She draws the key from her habit, inserts it into the lock, and opens the iron gate. She leaves the key in place. The Superior, the devout women, and the nuns enter and take their seats on the benches facing the niche—covered by a brocade curtain—where the vial of the saint's blood is kept.

Father Corso has already arranged with the Mother Superior that his two seminarians will remain outside the crypt to guard the entrance, since the Garibaldians are anticlerical and some of them—perhaps drunk—might attempt to profane the ceremony. While the rite is underway, the two Chinese assistants, left outside, quietly remove the key from the lock and press it into

a slab of clay to make a mold. In the dead of night, inside the convent's pharmacy, Father Corso and his two helpers melt lead and pour it into the clay mold, producing a perfect copy of the crypt key. The Jesuit, reminding the Chinese to remain silent and invisible, orders them to go down to the church and retrieve the vial containing the saint's blood.

Left alone in his room, he opens the wardrobe and takes out a replica of the monstrance used for the blood of Saint Gennaro. He had found it in a small shop in Posillipo—one of the many common fakes sold in Naples to wealthy devotees attending the cathedral ceremony or to curious foreign tourists. The one he acquired is well made, though slightly smaller than the original. The two Chinese return in absolute silence, carrying the stolen vial. No one has seen them; no one has noticed anything. Father Corso takes the container and fits it into the false monstrance. Even though it differs slightly from the vessel used for Saint Gennaro's blood, it fits well enough. From a distance, no one would ever notice the difference. He places everything back inside the wardrobe and dismisses his assistants.

Scene 3

On Saturday before dinner, Father Corso leaves the convent dressed in black, accompanied by his two inseparable seminarians, and heads to the episcopal palace where he is expected for the evening meal. Days earlier, the Cardinal of Naples, having learned of his arrival in the city, had summoned him to his private study to understand his intentions.

The Jesuit had revealed what the high prelate already knew: that he had been sent by the Vatican Secretariat to keep watch

over Garibaldi's expedition and prevent it from advancing toward Rome. The cardinal had made it clear that, if the goal was to save Rome, Father Corso had full freedom of action in the city — but as for the final outcome of Garibaldi's campaign, Heaven alone would decide. If Saint Gennaro performed the miracle, it meant that Naples and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies were destined to fall to Garibaldi. If he did not, the Neapolitans themselves would drive Garibaldi and his rabble back to South America.

In the following days, after hearing the enthusiastic praise of the Mother Superior of San Gregorio, the cardinal invited Father Corso to the Saturday dinner of the cathedral chapter, since the Jesuit would also be participating in the next day's ceremony at the Duomo. The cardinal could not exclude a papal envoy from the celebrations.

The Saturday dinner, held on the eve of the saint's feast, is not a banquet but a simple communal meal of prayer and reflection. There is wine, there is bread, but the only dish served is a mussel soup.

Father Corso and the two Chinese assistants are welcomed at the episcopal palace by a monsignor, who tells them they are a bit early and that the cardinal and the canons are not yet ready. The Jesuit — who had calculated this precisely — asks the monsignor to show them around the palace and act as their guide. The monsignor leads them through the library, the chapel, the reception halls. At the end of the tour, Father Corso asks a favor: to visit the kitchens. He justifies the request by saying he wants to show his seminarians how a large ecclesiastical kitchen functions in the West. Since there is still time before dinner begins, the monsignor leads them to visit the kitchens. While the cooks — men and women alike — are

distracted by the two Chinese seminarians, whose features they have never seen before, Father Corso discreetly pours into the soup a substance that induces nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, perfectly mimicking the symptoms of food poisoning.

An hour later, the cardinal, the canons, Father Corso, and the two Chinese take their seats at the table. As one of the canons reads Scripture in silence, the soup is served. The Chinese do not touch it, and Father Corso explains that his seminarians are fasting that evening, according to Eastern tradition, to prepare for a great feast. The others eat several servings of the soup, which is ladled out more than once, while Father Corso consumes only the bare minimum. Toward the end of the meal, the first symptoms appear. Some faint, others turn green with nausea; some retch violently, others rush to the latrines doubled over with abdominal pain.

The palace descends into chaos, with servants unable to cope with the number of stricken clerics. The cardinal suffers the most — he is famously fond of mussel soup. Even Father Corso vomits and feels ill, though far less than the others. The bewildered staff try to understand the cause of the catastrophe. Naturally, the soup is the first suspect. They pour a bowl of it for a dog. The animal laps it up and soon collapses in agony. By the time the doctors arrive breathless from the hospital, the diagnosis is obvious: acute food poisoning from spoiled or contaminated shellfish.

The doctors administer pain-relieving remedies and recommend citrus juice—especially lemon—for its astringent properties. They impose a light diet and strict rest for a couple of days on the cardinal and the other prelates, at least until the pain subsides. The cardinal, writhing and convulsing, protests that

it is impossible: the next day he must officiate the ceremony of the blood. The doctors forbid it in the strongest terms.

The only one feeling noticeably better—aside from two or three elderly priests who had eaten very little—is Father Corso, who consumed the soup only in moderation. The cardinal asks him to officiate the liturgy of the liquefaction. Father Corso accepts and, still feigning gastric distress, promises he will recover by morning.

The two Chinese assistants lift him onto their shoulders and carry him back to San Gregorio. There, Father Corso takes an antidote and, within a few hours, is fresh as a rose once again.

Scene 4

Joe arrives at the meeting. The warehouses up to number 40 lie in a sparsely populated area of the port, far from the actual city, so he has no trouble reaching them unseen. Set into the massive double doors is a small side-door on which Joe knocks. A peephole slides open, then shuts again. The door opens, and Joe is let inside.

Carminati wants to finish telling him his story. He speaks of Malta, of the shootout with John, and of how he entered the Baron's service. He even removes his glove to show Joe the wound. But that is not why he summoned him.

The Milanese explains that this area contains the warehouses recently leased by Monroy. He was the one who handled the deal on behalf of the Baron, ever since the Baron became partner to his future father-in-law. But this particular warehouse, the

one they are standing in, the Baron rented under his own name — claiming he did not want the tea for his personal use stored together with the tea destined for the common folk. Typical of the Baron.

Carminati shows him several crates of tea shipped from China on a Monroy cargo vessel, unloaded separately because they were reserved for the Sant'Anna family. One of the crates has a broken corner. Carminati explains what happened.

The Monroy porters, while carrying the crates inside, dropped one. Carminati scolded them, expecting tea to spill from the cracked corner — but nothing came out. Instantly, he understood the crate did not contain tea and dismissed the workers. Then he checked it himself, using a crowbar and taking care not to splinter the wood. Despite the difficulty caused by his injured hand, he managed to pry the lid open. To his astonishment, the crate was filled with packages of opium balls. So many had never been seen in Italy, where the substance was used only by a small elite.

Joe asks to examine the contents, since smoking opium, pressed into round cakes, bears the seal of its producer. Having fought a war over the substance, Joe knows the logos of the British manufacturers and can trace who shipped it. Carminati replies that one doesn't need to have fought in China to recognize this particular mark. He opens the crate fully and pulls out a cake.

Joe cannot believe his eyes. Stamped on it is the IHS monogram, encircled by a sunburst and accompanied by a Chinese ideogram. The opium belongs to the Chinese branch of the Society of Jesus.

Carminati and Joe immediately agree that Father Corso is involved. In fact the Baron had sent Carminati a message ordering

him to hand over a copy of the warehouse keys to the two Chinese seminarians accompanying the Jesuit, claiming that some of the crates contained the priest's personal belongings. But both men know those two are no seminarians — they fight like trained warriors.

Carminati doesn't know why the opium has arrived in Italy or what was exchanged for it. But he explains that the Baron has long instructed him that, once Italy is unified, he is to act as his real-estate agent and rent grand townhouses in the major cities of central and northern Italy — properties suitable to be converted into gambling halls and luxury brothels. And the tea served there would come from the Baron's personal reserve.

Could the drug be the "extra" for his wealthy guests? If any of this were discovered, the Baron would find himself in a humiliating position — one that could even break his engagement to Frances. In fact, the Baron and Monroy signed a prenuptial agreement explicitly stating that Frances had the right to end the engagement or divorce her husband if the Baron's moral integrity were compromised. On top of that, he would automatically lose his shares. Monroy, a fierce opponent of the opium trade, had inserted into the company statute an absolute prohibition: any shareholder involved in the opium business, in any capacity, would forfeit all their shares. The Baron would end up without a wife and without a large portion of his expected profits.

But Joe is thinking of something else entirely. He has seen what that substance does to populations. It begins with the elites, then spreads to those who can afford it, and as the market grows, it reaches everyone. China — a vast empire — had been brought to its knees by opium. Italy would suffer the same fate. The

Baron knows this, and he certainly has a plan to profit from it. He could even be playing a double game with Garibaldi and the Piedmontese. The Baron must be stopped. And perhaps, in doing so, Frances could be saved from his grasp.

A spark of hope reignites in Joe.

Scene 5

In a luxury brothel, the Baron celebrates his last night as a bachelor with a company of wealthy degenerates. Everything is on him: the food, the champagne, the girls. After yet another toast, the Baron announces that he has brought a surprise for the more depraved among them. He takes a wooden crate he had brought along and opens it in front of everyone. Inside, it is filled with opium balls. Applause erupts, and many of the guests help themselves, smoking with the girls. Soon they are all dazed and drifting into oblivion. The Baron watches the scene of degradation with satisfaction. *"This stuff really works,"* he thinks. *"That damned priest knows more tricks than the devil."*

Two days earlier, Father Corso had sent him a message asking him to give his "seminarians" a copy of the keys to his private warehouse at the port. He added that the Baron would not regret it. Curious to see what devilry the priest had devised, the Baron had instructed Carmignano accordingly.

That very day, after Joe's mission, Father Corso had come to see him under the pretext of finalizing the details of the ceremony. He had brought with him a conspicuous package.

Inside were several opium cakes, along with a selection of ready-molded balls for immediate use. And many more remained in the warehouse.

The Baron, surprised, had demanded an explanation. Father Corso, having long sensed the Baron's interest in opium, had asked the Society to supply him with a discreet quantity. Opium is a medicinal substance, used primarily as an anesthetic. The Society of Jesus, being the Western organization most deeply rooted in China, is the largest importer of opium in the West, using it in its medical centers or reselling it to pharmacists, pharmaceutical houses, doctors, clinics, and hospitals. In Rome, the Society maintains a vast storage depot for this and other substances shipped by its missionaries from every corner of the world.

What he had brought was only a taste of the opium the Baron would receive once the Taiping — led by Garibaldi — seized Beijing. But for that to happen, Garibaldi first had to fail in his attempt to conquer the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. And, according to the Jesuit, that was exactly what would happen.

The Baron had also asked how Father Corso managed to smuggle the opium inside Monroy crates shipped from China, and how he knew the Sant'Anna family had rented a private warehouse. Father Corso replied that the Society of Jesus has eyes, ears, and hands everywhere. *That Jesuit sometimes gives me chills*, the Baron concludes, before snapping back to the moment.

Seeing that all his companions have collapsed into the stupor induced by the drug, the Baron rises, settles the bill with the madam, and heads to his carriage to reach the port and board his yacht, which will take him back to Castellammare within an hour. He must rise early the next morning.

Scene 6

The Naples cathedral has been filling since early morning. By eleven o'clock, an hour before the ceremony begins, not only is the Duomo packed, but the crowd has gathered all around the church and into the side streets, making it difficult to pass either on foot or by any other means.

Father Corso and the two Chinese assistants left the monastery around nine and headed straight to the cathedral, where they needed to prepare for the ceremony. But first, Father Corso stopped by the Mother Superior of San Gregorio to take his leave and thank her for her hospitality. After the ceremony—whatever the saint's verdict might be—he and the seminarians would go immediately to Castellammare and then, in the evening, depart for Sicily, from where they would embark again for China. They would not be returning. As he left, he informed the sisters on duty that day that his luggage would be collected later by trusted men of his.

Around a quarter to noon, Garibaldi arrives on Via Duomo on horseback, escorted by a group of Garibaldians both on foot and mounted. They are the general's guard, whose command has been entrusted to the Maltese. The crowd parts in two before the church entrance and falls silent as Garibaldi dismounts to enter the building. His horse and the other riders remain outside, while the soldiers on foot escort him inside. As the people close back around the mounted Garibaldians, an excited hush settles over the square. In just a few minutes, the truth will be known: would Naples — and with it the entire kingdom — remain with the Bourbons, or give itself to Garibaldi?

The bells strike noon, then break into festive ringing. The Neapolitans wait.

The sacristy doors open, and a procession of clergy emerges. Leading it is a line of altar boys, followed by the elderly canons who had survived the previous night's bout of diarrhea. Behind them, in full ceremonial dress, come the members of the Deputation of the Treasury of Saint Gennaro — all elderly Neapolitan nobles. Then Father Corso appears, wearing the celebrant's vestments, with the two Chinese assistants behind him. Finally comes a platoon of Honor Guards, armed with sabers and pistols, composed of senior cadets from the Nunziatella Military Academy. Walking beside Father Corso are the Guardian of the Chapel, Marchese Ferri di San Felice, and Count Coppola Turafelli dei Galeota, the Regent of the Deputation — the head of the Confraternity of Saint Gennaro, custodians of the saint's relics and treasure. Both men are quite elderly and, lacking eyeglasses — forbidden by ceremonial protocol — can barely see anything up close.

The procession passes in front of Garibaldi, who has taken his place in the transept, at the center of the main nave before the altar. Father Corso gives the general a brief nod of greeting and continues chanting as he proceeds toward the side chapel that houses the relic. The chapel is closed by a gilded gate.

The Guardian of the Chapel, Marchese Ferri di San Felice, wears a golden key around his neck, which he ceremoniously inserts into the lock. The gate opens. The Regent of the Deputation enters first, followed by Father Corso and a few altar boys. The rest of the procession remains outside. The two Chinese assistants position themselves on either side of the entrance. Earlier that morning, the Jesuit had explicitly

requested that his two seminarians be responsible for security. He trusted only them and did not trust the Garibaldians. The Regent had agreed, admitting that he too was unsure of the true intentions of the Redshirts.

Two altar boys carry two silver keys on separate cushions. One key belongs to the Deputation, the other to the Curia. Throughout the year they are kept apart and are brought together only for the liquefaction ceremony. Both are required to open the case containing the relic; one is useless without the other.

The Regent takes his key, and Father Corso takes his. All the altar boys but two are asked to leave. Once alone, each inserts his key into the double lock and turns it, triggering the opening mechanism.

At that moment, a sound like a gunshot echoes through the church, followed by loud noises, agitation, shouting. Father Corso and the Regent freeze and order the altar boys to go see what is happening outside. From beyond the gate come screams: *"They shot Garibaldi! Garibaldi is dead!"* The uproar grows louder.

The lock of the reliquary case is open, but the cabinet doors remain closed.

Marchese Ferri di San Felice rushes in, telling the Regent to come with him at once to calm the crowd, or there will be a massacre. Outside, the people are becoming hysterical. The Regent hurries out of the chapel while the two Chinese assistants shut the gate and stand in front of it. From the outside, the marchese turns the key and locks it.

Father Corso, now alone, wastes no time. The bang was nothing more than a firecracker the Chinese had hidden behind the altar choir, timed to explode when the flame of a slow-burning candle reached it. The Jesuit opens the reliquary case just enough not to be seen from outside. He removes the movable section of

the monstrance that holds the vial, slips it into one of the two wide pockets sewn into his cassock for this very purpose, and from the other pocket pulls out Saint Patricia's vial, fitting it into the support of the original. Then, lightning-fast, he closes the case again.

At that moment, he hears the key turning once more in the chapel gate, and the Regent enters, followed by the two altar boys. He tells the priest that the emergency has passed. Garibaldi is unharmed and has climbed onto the pulpit to deny the rumors of his injury. The bang is believed to have been a firework set off by some troublemaker.

Together, he and Father Corso open the reliquary doors and confirm that the blood has not liquefied. The count, seeing everything in a blur, fails to notice the small differences between this vial and the original. Only he and the cardinal would be able to tell that the monstrance in Father Corso's hands is a fake — but one is bedridden, and the other can barely see. Everyone else has either never seen the relic or only glimpsed it from afar.

Father Corso and the Regent move to step outside to announce the news to the Neapolitans, but the altar boys have already run ahead. Throughout the church — and across the squares and streets outside — the news of the failed liquefaction spreads instantly. The Garibaldians, both inside and outside the cathedral, load their rifles and pistols, ready to respond to any hostile action from the crowd. Inside, the murmuring swells into an uproar. People begin shouting, claiming that Garibaldi has been rejected by the saint, that he must be seized and handed over to the Bourbons. Pushing, shouting, shoving, chaos.

Father Corso and the Regent, standing at the chapel threshold, watch in dismay as pandemonium erupts inside the church. There is no way to reach the altar, and a riot could break out at

any moment. The mob might sack the cathedral and the entire Treasury of the Saint. Even the blood itself is in danger.

The young lieutenant commanding the Honor Guard fights his way to the Regent and asks for instructions. The count orders the emergency protocol to be activated. Father Corso knows it as well — the cardinal's assistants had explained it to him once it was decided that the Jesuit would participate in the ceremony as co-celebrant.

Sometimes the emotion stirred by the miracle — whether it occurs or not — unleashes waves of hysterical fervor among the Neapolitans. Such overwhelming emotion can quickly turn into a riot. Throughout the city's history, it has happened more than once. In these cases, there is an evacuation plan for the cardinal, the members of the Deputation, and the VIPs present in the cathedral — a group that, until the previous year, included the royal family in the front row. The Honor Guard, stationed in strategic positions, is tasked with extracting the cardinal and the relic and bringing them behind the altar. One of the choir stalls conceals one of the two entrances to the Catacombs of San Gennaro — a network of tunnels branching out from the cathedral and running beneath the entire city. An altar boy trained in navigating the underground passages, once the entrance is opened, would lead the cardinal and the relic to safety, while the Honor Guard would prevent rioters from approaching the altar. The VIPs, meanwhile, would be escorted to the cathedral's crypt, where the saint's remains are kept. The crypt, built during the Renaissance, is known as the Cappella del Succorpo, and it is accessed by a staircase at the center of the transept. Inside the chapel there is an entrance to a tunnel that leads directly to the Royal Palace, and another that emerges at the port.

Scene 7

The day before, Father Corso — specifically instructed by the cardinal — had also explained the procedure to Garibaldi and to the Maltese, who commanded his escort. But he had deliberately explained it incorrectly. In the Jesuit's version, if anything went wrong, the Honor Guard would take care of Father Corso, while Garibaldi was to take refuge with his men in the crypt, where the Maltese and the other Garibaldians would barricade themselves and fight to the last. Garibaldi was to enter the tunnel leading to the Royal Palace with as few men as possible, so as not to weaken the Garibaldian line defending the chapel from outside attackers. The two Chinese assistants, if the worst happened, were supposed to come to the Maltese's aid and support the rest of the escort.

In reality, once underground, the two Chinese were to overpower Garibaldi's escort and eliminate them. Then, after sedating Garibaldi with a soporific applied through a cloth held over his mouth, they would carry him on their shoulders through the tunnels to the port. There are only two tunnels, each clearly marked with the direction it leads; there is no way to take the wrong one.

At the port, they would go to the Baron's warehouse — for which they still had the key — shave Garibaldi's beard, dye his hair, and change his clothes. Shortly afterward, the Baron's men would arrive to collect him and take him to Castellammare, locked inside the trunk that Father Corso keeps in his room at the convent, bought for the occasion from a junk dealer in the Spanish Quarters. There is no danger of Garibaldi waking up during the journey. The sedative, prepared by Father Corso in

the convent pharmacy, is so powerful that Garibaldi would not regain consciousness until the following night — and by then he would already be aboard a steamer bound for Nanjing. Father Corso would take care of him. He still has plenty of the little vials he used to prepare for Duncan. Once the general began taking them, he would become far more compliant. After all, with his campaign failed, hunted by the Bourbons, and exiled from Italy, the only path left to him would be to cover himself in glory in China.

The Maltese, though careful not to show it, has been suspicious since morning, ever since he was told that the Baron would not be coming to Naples that day. After Joe's mission, the Baron had spoken at length with Father Corso about the wedding and had then summoned Carmignano. Clearly the Jesuit had persuaded him to change his plans, because when the Baron departed for Castellammare, he issued new orders to him as well.

In fact, on Saturday night, the Maltese had remained aboard the Baron's yacht to receive instructions for the following day. When the Baron came aboard, he informed him that he no longer needed to handle security for him and for Frances during the wedding in the cathedral, because the ceremony would not take place there after all, but in Castellammare. For the next day, instead, the Maltese had been chosen to command Garibaldi's escort. After the blood ceremony — whatever its outcome — he was to ride back to the villa to attend the wedding. Two hours at most, and he would be there.

John, as always, had asked no questions and requested no explanations.

During his long conversation with Father Corso the day before, surrounded by all that opium, the Baron had finally been convinced to abandon Garibaldi and leave him in the clutches of the Society of Jesus. He had become certain that the Jesuit was plotting something to ensure the success of his plan, because Father Corso had strongly urged him not to marry in the Naples cathedral. In fact, for the following day, the Jesuit predicted that it would not be a good place to be holding a wedding. Father Corso had also asked him to order Carminati to send two of his men on Sunday morning to the convent of Santa Patrizia to collect a trunk that was then to be placed in the warehouse at the port by noon. That trunk was to be loaded that same evening onto a steamer bound for Palermo, where Father Corso and his men would board, their final destination being Alexandria in Egypt. From there, they would take a ship to China. As for the wedding, once the blood ceremony in the cathedral was over, Father Corso would take the train the Baron had rented for the wedding — a train that, with this change of plans, would otherwise go unused. The train would be waiting for him at the station, and as soon as the priest arrived, it would depart for Castellammare. There, the Jesuit would celebrate the wedding and then leave for Palermo aboard a fast Monroy steamer, which would reach Sicily even before the ship carrying Garibaldi as a prisoner.

Everything Father Corso has planned is running as smoothly as oil. The shouting, the pushing, the cries all seem directed against Garibaldi, while from outside the cathedral more unrest can be heard breaking out. The escort surrounds Garibaldi with weapons drawn, but the way to the crypt is blocked by the crowd, and not even the Honor Guard can move.

Father Corso, clutching the relic and shielding it with his body, forces his way forward, protected by the Nunziatella cadets. He does not want the monstrance in his hands to fall, nor the one in his pocket to break. After all, Father Corso is still a priest, and he believes in the spiritual power of these relics.

He has already planned that, once fleeing through the maze of underground galleries, he will ask the altar boy — before taking him to the station — to stop at San Gregorio Armeno, because one of the catacomb exits opens directly into the crypt of Saint Patricia's reliquary. The exit grate unlocks with the same key as the gate to the crypt. At that point, Father Corso would place Saint Patricia's blood back into its original monstrance and leave Saint Gennaro's there. It would be found when the altar boy returned — by which time Garibaldi would already have been drugged and sealed inside the trunk.

The saint's blood had already liquefied in the case before the opening, so they would find it fluid. In Naples, people would say that the blood had liquefied after Garibaldi fled the city.

Scene 8

Before dawn on Sunday, one of the young canons of the cathedral — one of the few who has recovered quickly from the poisoning — knocks at the door of the sisters of San Gregorio Armeno to ask whether they can take care of the kitchen at the episcopal palace for at least a few days. Since it is unclear who is responsible for the incident, or whether it was intentional, the Cardinal has dismissed all the kitchen staff. Could one of them, perhaps an anticlerical secretly excited by Garibaldian fervor, have tried to poison them all?

The Mother Superior agrees at once and promises that she and several other sisters will arrive at the bishop's palace around ten to begin preparing lunch. But when she and the chosen sisters attempt to leave the convent, they find a solid wall of people outside, and getting through would be difficult even though the episcopal palace is only a few hundred meters away. They decide instead to pass through the Catacombs of San Gennaro. The bishop's palace also has an access to the underground passages, which opens directly in front of the palace porter's lodge. Once there, they need only ask the porter to unlock the gate that closes the passage, and they will be inside.

The Mother Superior retrieves the key to the crypt and opens the underground chapel. She lets the sisters in and closes the door behind them. Then she heads toward the grate that leads into the catacombs — but a strange detail catches her eye. The curtain covering the reliquary niche is slightly out of place. It is not as she left it on Friday. She approaches the wall, makes the sign of the cross, and pulls aside the curtain of the niche that houses the reliquary. The woman lets out a scream when she realizes that the monstrance containing the saint's blood is empty.

The Mother Superior does not lose her composure. She grabs the empty reliquary-holder and rushes into the catacombs, followed at full speed by the other sisters. She wants to inform the Cardinal of the theft as quickly as possible.

The Cardinal struggles to remain standing and still suffers stomach cramps, but he seems better and, with the help of a cane, tries to take a few steps in the palace courtyard. He hears a great commotion at the entrance, and moments later the Mother Superior of the Sisters of Saint Patricia appears before him in

tears. The Cardinal receives the news of the disappearance of the vial containing the saint's blood with dismay, and wonders who could be the wretched heretic and apostate who stole it — especially since the two entrances to the crypt are properly locked, and the key is kept by the Mother Superior in her safe. Impossible that it was one of the sisters, so who could it have been?

As they consider what to do, one of the sisters pushes her way through the crowd and reaches the porter's lodge of the episcopal palace, breathless. She is brought before the Mother Superior and the Cardinal to show them what she has found. While cleaning the convent pharmacy, she had retrieved from the bottom of a wardrobe a forgotten tunic, similar to the ones worn during the day by Father Corso's Chinese assistants. In one of the pockets she found a block of clay, which she now displays.

Everyone immediately understands that it is a mold used to copy a key, and the Mother Superior instantly recognizes the shape of the key to the crypt.

From the windows of the episcopal palace come shouts and the noise of scuffles. Then an altar boy, sent by the Regent, brings the news that the blood has not liquefied and that the crowd wants to lynch Garibaldi. Only an intervention by His Excellency can stop the massacre.

The Cardinal knows this is impossible. For years, every Thursday night before the feast, the Cardinal — together with a trusted parishioner who is also an expert lock-picker — enters the cathedral and makes his way into the chapel of the blood. They open the case and check the state of the relic. Then they close it again and restore the locks. The inspection serves to prevent mass hysteria among the faithful, especially in the event

of a failed liquefaction. He saw with his own eyes that Saint Gennaro's blood was already liquefied on Thursday.

Therefore the conclusion is clear. Father Corso poisoned them at dinner so that he could be the celebrant and use the saint's blood — which by now had solidified again — to sabotage Garibaldi's enterprise despite the saint's favorable sign. And the Cardinal had expressly forbidden him to do so.

There is not a minute to lose. They must go to the cathedral and stop the Jesuit. The Cardinal asks the altar boy whether he knows the catacombs, and the boy says yes. He then orders him to go to the Royal Palace and summon the entire Garibaldian garrison to keep the crowd under control. They are not many, since the rest of the Redshirts are still outside the city, but they would still be useful. One of the canons reminds the Cardinal that at the Garibaldian headquarters in Naples there is currently only the British Legion, which did not go to the cathedral because its members are Protestants. The Cardinal, fluent in English thanks to his years as Apostolic Nuncio in Dublin, writes a message to the British asking them to hurry, because Garibaldi's life is in danger.

The altar boy takes the message and sprints breathlessly into the catacombs.

Scene 9

Joe strolls idly through the garden in front of the Royal Palace. He has chosen to remain on guard duty not for religious reasons, but because he has no desire to be in the cathedral for the Baron's wedding. He still knows nothing about the changes to the wedding plans.

Suddenly, the altar boy bursts out of a manhole in the garden and asks for the commander. Joe tells him that he is the one, and the boy hands him the message. Joe reads it carefully and orders the bugler to sound assembly. The Garibaldians rush out at a run, and Joe commands them to follow him. With a tightness in his chest at the thought of seeing Frances in a wedding dress on the Baron's arm, he asks the boy to lead them underground — and in no time they find themselves before the Cardinal.

The Archbishop, in perfect English, asks Joe to escort him to the cathedral because Garibaldi is about to be overwhelmed by a furious crowd that believes he has been rejected by the city's saint. But the general and the Neapolitans are victims of a deception. From the window come shouts, explosions, disorder. The faithful outside the cathedral are trying to force their way in to massacre the Redshirts.

The curia palace stands beside the cathedral and has a direct entrance into it. The Cardinal is determined to go into the cathedral and expose the Jesuit's deceptions. He has the sisters dress him in his sacred vestments and asks the canons to bring him the crozier. Then, together with Joe and the Legion acting as his escort, he sets off toward the church. While the Mother Superior and a Garibaldian help the Cardinal walk, Joe and the others rush to the door that separates the episcopal palace from the cathedral. From the other side they hear a din like a battle: shouted orders from soldiers mingling with the roar of the enraged crowd pressing forward. They are ready to burst in as soon as the Cardinal is prepared to make his entrance.

Joe is now terrified at the thought of seeing Frances — but with all that chaos, she might be in mortal danger. He has to go; whatever happens, happens. The Cardinal arrives, the door opening onto one side of the transept swings wide, and they

enter the cathedral. At first no one notices them, and Joe and the others must force their way through. Then more and more people become aware of the Cardinal's presence; tempers cool, voices drop, and the crowd parts before the prelate. The Regent comes toward him, and the Cardinal asks where the relic is. They answer that Father Corso has it — the Honor Guard managed to get him to safety. By now he is already who knows where.

The Cardinal then turns to the people, explaining that they — and the Garibaldians, and the clergy — have all been deceived by the priest who was officiating the ceremony in his place. That man is an impostor, and he switched the vials of Saint Gennaro and Saint Patricia so that the Neapolitans would drive Garibaldi out of the city. As proof, the Cardinal has the empty reliquary-holder of Saint Patricia brought to him and shows it to the crowd. Murmurs of disbelief and indignation ripple through the people.

Saint Gennaro's blood did liquefy — and that deceitful priest, wanting to make everyone believe the opposite, stole and used Saint Patricia's blood, which he knew remained liquid only on Fridays.

From the catacombs a nun emerges and immediately seeks out someone from the Deputation. The Regent, informed of what she has reported, approaches the Mother Superior and respectfully whispers something in her ear. She relays it at once to the Cardinal. The prelate announces to the people that both Saint Patricia's vial and the vial containing the true blood of Saint Gennaro have just been found in the crypt of San Gregorio Armeno — and the nun who discovered them has confirmed that the saint's blood is not only liquid, but actually boiling.

The Mother Superior calls the nun to her side because she has something to show the faithful. The nun has brought with her Saint Patricia's vial, which is displayed. The blood of Saint

Patricia is astonishingly liquid. Someone cries out that it is a miracle. The crowd breaks into a great applause; shouts of joy rise; someone yells "Long live Garibaldi!"

The Cardinal sends for him.

The general had managed to descend into the chapel with his Garibaldians. But he had refused to flee through the tunnel and insisted on staying to defend himself. The Chinese assistants had urged him to go with them, but he refused to abandon his men. The two of them then vanished without a trace into one of the escape tunnels.

The Regent proposes carrying Saint Patricia's vial in procession to San Gregorio Armeno and then bringing back to the cathedral, in a counter-procession, the liquefied blood of Saint Gennaro. The Cardinal approves. He goes to the altar, takes the saint's vial, and places it back into its monstrance. Then he raises it high, and applause, shouts, and hymns fill the church. Supported by the Mother Superior, the Cardinal is joined by the canons and the altar boys. The members of the Deputation fall in behind them, and even a few Garibaldians join the line. The crowd parts to let the procession pass. When they step outside, the people are celebrating. A few tricolour flags have appeared. As the relic passes, Neapolitans remove their hats and throw flowers.

And when, outside San Gregorio, the Cardinal shows the people the fluid blood of Saint Gennaro, the crowd erupts in jubilation.

Scene 10

Meanwhile Joe, the Maltese, Garibaldi, and the others are consulting on what to do next. Those present want to carry Garibaldi out in triumph and urge him to leave the cathedral and address the crowd. But at that moment the altar boy who accompanied Father Corso re-emerges from the catacombs. He is astonished to find the people celebrating instead of trying to lynch the Garibaldians, and he innocently asks what has happened. Someone brings him to Garibaldi, who asks the boy where the Jesuit has gone. The boy explains that he first led him to San Gregorio Armeno, and then the priest had him guide him to Porta Nolana, where there is an entrance that opens into the back of a tavern not far from one of the gate's two towers.

The Maltese, breaking the silence surrounding his true orders, reports the instructions he received from the Baron and says that Father Corso is very likely heading to the station, which is less than a kilometer from where he emerged. The Baron had rented a train for that day — it was meant to shuttle the wedding guests back and forth. But he clearly knew what was going to happen and had changed the wedding plans accordingly. Since the wedding was no longer taking place in Naples, the train was therefore free. Knowing the Baron, he will certainly have placed it at the Jesuit's disposal to go to Castellammare. That must be where he is headed, since he has a wedding to celebrate.

Joe needs no further explanation. Like lightning, he bolts outside, grabs a horse from a Garibaldian, and hurls himself toward the station. The square is now half-empty, because the Neapolitans' attention has shifted elsewhere. They are

all packed into Via San Gregorio, where — when the Cardinal displays the true blood — a roar rises that echoes all the way to Joe's ears as he drives his horse at full speed.

As he turns toward Castel Capuano, he hears someone calling him from afar. Carminati is approaching on horseback, wearing a red shirt for the occasion. He tells Joe that he heard what happened in the cathedral and immediately understood that the Jesuit would try to flee and reach the Baron by train.

They arrive at the station, and the train is billowing great clouds of steam, as if ready to depart. Joe is about to dismount when one of the two Chinese assistants — appearing out of nowhere — strikes him with a slap that stuns him for a moment. Then a punch lands, leaving Joe half-conscious. Carminati throws himself at the man and brings him down, but then feels a heavy blow to his back from the other Chinese. The two, seeing that there was no way to kidnap Garibaldi, had taken one of the tunnels, emerged at the port, and then made their way to the station. One of them draws a long knife, ready to kill the two Garibaldians lying dazed on the ground.

But a whistle snaps their attention away. It is Father Corso, ordering them to run and board the train. The Chinese, frustrated, abandon Joe and Carminati, and the two Asians leap onto the train. The engineer starts the engine, and the locomotive — pulling only a single carriage besides the coal tender — charges out at full steam toward Castellammare.

In the meantime, the Maltese, Garibaldi, and the men of the Legion arrive at the station on horseback. Joe and Carminati are still aching from the blows they received. When they are asked whether they found the priest, they answer yes — but he has already departed. Soon he will be safe inside the Baron's villa.

The Maltese points out that capturing the Jesuit will not be easy. He explains that in Castellammare the Baron has fortified the villa he rented for the wedding and filled it with armed *picciotti*. Moreover, in Castellammare a steamer is waiting to take Father Corso to Palermo, from where he would then depart for Egypt and later for China.

Joe is determined to pursue him nonetheless and go to Castellammare to confront the Baron. Garibaldi does not understand Joe's urgency, believing the Baron to be an ally. But Joe hints that the Baron has always been in league with Father Corso and is therefore complicit in the attempt to sabotage the Garibaldian enterprise. The Baron knew that something major would happen today — something that would lead to the tragic end of Garibaldi and the Redshirts. In fact, he did not appear in the cathedral to be married, even though the invitation said he would.

They will explain everything to Garibaldi later. For now, they must try to stop the prelate and his two cutthroats disguised as priests.

Carminati then proposes that Joe follow him along a series of tracks that intersect the railway, so they can reach a viaduct before the train passes and try to jump onto it from above. Garibaldi and the others would take the coastal road. At the start of its route, the train loops inland, then the railway runs along the sea all the way to Castellammare. The train has only just departed, so it will take time before it reaches the coast. There is plenty of time to cut it off and stop it.

The groups split and set off. Joe and Carminati spur their horses through country lanes, hillside mule tracks, and stretches of carriage road. They reach the viaduct and spot the train in the distance. They dismount, climb over the wooden

fence, and prepare to jump. It's a drop of more than two meters, but the landing will be soft if they hit the coal tender.

The locomotive draws closer; the two men leap and land on the black mound of coal. They look toward the engineer, who has not noticed them. They see he is alone, so Father Corso must be in the carriage with the Chinese. They climb over the side of the tender and reach the footboard. Covered in soot, they open the door and burst inside.

Father Corso is seated in an armchair, reading a book and sipping a glass of wine. The crash of the door being forced open makes him lift his eyes, and he looks genuinely surprised to see Joe, who is about to speak — but the Jesuit cuts him off.

He tells him that, for Joe, this train marks the terminus of his life. Unaware of what has actually happened in the cathedral, Father Corso believes he has won and that he now has before him only two desperate survivors of the lynching of the Redshirts. He says he is sorry that his two men failed to kidnap Garibaldi as the original plan required, and that the general therefore must have been massacred in the crypt. That Garibaldi was always a stubborn fool, refusing the safe-conduct offered by the Church to keep him alive. What an idiot.

But it doesn't end there.

The Jesuit knows perfectly well about Joe's affair with Frances — the little kiss in the park, the tea seeds as a token of love. Did he really think he would get away with it? Well, it's all over now. The Chinese will dispose of both him and that double-dealer Carmignano who accompanied him. After throwing their bodies off the cliff, the train will reach Castellammare, where he will unite the Baron and his beloved Frances in marriage — and though not yet a bride, she will already be the widow of her foolish lover.

Joe has no time to reply. Father Corso signals to the Chinese, and they draw their assault knives and lunge at him. Joe dodges a strike and lands a punch on his attacker, throwing him off balance. He then shoves him against the wooden wall, making him slam his head hard. Carminati, meanwhile, struggles to draw his pistol, but the other Chinese blocks him with a kick to the stomach. Joe grabs a clay vase filled with flowers and hurls it at the man's head, hitting him square in the face. Carminati disarms the Chinese and pins him down, pummelling him with blows. The other Chinese, having recovered, reaches for one of the knives lying on the floor — but Joe levels the pistol straight at his face.

Then the train begins to slow.

Father Corso doesn't understand what is happening. Moments later, on both sides, Garibaldians on horseback come into view — and finally Garibaldi himself, who, still mounted, smiles with satisfaction at the sight of the priest's astonished face.

Joe then tells Father Corso that the terminus has indeed arrived. But for him.

The railway has been blocked by Garibaldi and his men by rolling a large boulder onto the tracks. When the train comes to a halt, Garibaldi and the others climb onto the carriage, weapons raised. The Chinese want to fight to the death, but Father Corso calls them back. Any resistance now is futile.

Garibaldi declares them under arrest and orders his men to tie up the three prisoners. Then he asks Father Corso whether he acted alone or had accomplices. The priest replies that everything he did, he did out of religious duty. At that, Carminati and Joe recount what they know about him and the Baron, and ask whether running brothels and trafficking opium also fall

under religious duty. Yes, Father Corso answers, if it serves to advance God's plans. Garibaldi tells him he could be sentenced to the gallows for what he has done — and if a court does not condemn him, the Neapolitans will, after the profanation of their most sacred relic. But Father Corso says he does not care. On the contrary, he might even be canonized as a martyr of the Church. After all, he is on a mission on behalf of the Pope, even if his methods are unorthodox. Was it not Paul who wrote *omnia munda mundis — all things are pure to the pure* — in his letter to Titus?

But there is one thing that comforts him. If the Baron does not see him arrive by a certain hour, he will take Frances to the church anyway. The Baron has brought with him several Jesuits from the College of Trapani. They will marry them.

Garibaldi then makes a lightning-fast decision. It is risky, but nothing frightens the Hero of Two Worlds. They will go to Castellammare to stop the Baron. Some of the men will take the two Chinese, bound and gagged, back to Naples, while the rest will follow him. Father Corso, chained, will come with them. The Maltese will help them infiltrate the villa.

Garibaldi calls for John — but the Maltese is nowhere to be found. He is no longer with them. He must have continued along the coastal road toward Castellammare while the others were busy rolling the boulder onto the tracks.

It does not matter. They go anyway, Garibaldi orders, peremptory as ever.

10

Act 10 - Fire on the Sant'Anna

Scene 1

The Baron is in Castellammare, preparing for the wedding. The Maltese arrives and brings him the news that Father Corso has been captured and arrested by Garibaldi. He also tells him that Carmignano has betrayed him — because of that Joe. Most likely, he and Garibaldi are on their way there. The Baron does not flinch. He gives several orders and positions his armed *picciotti* in strategic spots, waiting for their arrival.

An hour later, the Garibaldian detachment appears at the reinforced gates of the villa with Father Corso in handcuffs. The Jesuit has convinced them to bring him along because he intends to publicly reveal the Baron's plans. The *picciotti* have orders to let them through. The Baron waits for them, insolent and defiant, in the courtyard before the main building.

Garibaldi raises his voice at the Baron, telling him he has been informed of all his operations to sabotage Italian unification.

His Jesuit accomplice has confessed everything and is now here to confirm the accusations. Father Corso, noticing strange movements on the rooftops of the property, replies that his confession was extracted under threats and that he made everything up; therefore, he demands to be released immediately. Joe wants to punch him, but from the roof and from every direction armed *picciotti* reveal themselves. Their rifles are aimed at the Garibaldians, ready to fire. The Baron orders Garibaldi and his men to dismount and drop their weapons, as they are surrounded. The Garibaldians are forced to obey, while Father Corso is freed by one of the Baron's men.

The Baron tells Garibaldi that his hour has come. In a moment he will order his men to fire. With his death, the Garibaldians would fall into chaos, and he would telegraph King Francis II to command his army on the Volturno to attack the Redshirts in their panic. It would be an easy defeat. The Baron would be hailed as the hero of the Two Sicilies and the savior of the kingdom. Father Corso says he is sorry for Garibaldi. He would have preferred to have him as a general in China rather than as a bandit executed in Campania. But it makes no difference. A heavy silence falls.

In that silence, Joe brings up the matter of the opium and explains to Monroy the Baron's plan to make Italy dependent. To do so, he had struck deals with Father Corso and intended to use his father-in-law and business partner's resources to import it without his knowledge. Monroy is appalled and asks the Baron whether what Joe says is true.

The Baron looks at Father Corso and smiles. He asks him how long it takes to celebrate a valid marriage. The priest answers that it takes less than ten minutes. The Baron then draws his pistol and points it at Monroy. He tells him he is going

to kill him and then marry his daughter. Officially, Monroy would have died in a shootout with the Garibaldians, and since the Baron would have married his daughter and sole heir, he would become the owner of the company. Then, to silence her, he would lock Frances away in a remote cloistered convent somewhere in Christendom. But not before Frances hands over all the remaining Da Hong Pao seeds, Father Corso adds. The Baron has Frances brought out, dressed as a bride. Two *picciotti* drag her out by force. When she is in front of him, he slaps her violently. Then, half-fainting, he has her taken back inside the villa.

Before pulling the trigger on Monroy, the Baron wants to take immediate revenge on the traitor. So he tells the Maltese that Carmignano is actually Carminati — the man who killed his fiancée. Carminati, caught off guard, says he knows nothing about this, but the Baron insists it is true and explains why. Carminati never knew he had also killed the young woman during the shootout at the casino.

The Maltese remains outwardly cold, but he begins to tremble more and more. The Baron thinks that at any moment John will explode in rage and start a massacre. Instead, the Maltese calms himself and tells him he has known for a long time. Once, he happened to see Carminati without gloves and noticed the scar. But after investigating in the criminal underworld, he learned that the real mastermind behind the attack — out of sheer personal convenience — had been the Baron, who then, with a thousand lies, bound them both to him. He, the Baron, was the true murderer of Helen. He has never said anything all these years because he was waiting for the right moment to make him pay.

He now points his pistol at the Baron and disarms him. He

grabs the Baron by the neck and warns the *picciotti* not to shoot, or he will kill him. The Baron signals his men to hold their fire. The Maltese asks Garibaldi, Joe, and the others to pick up their weapons again.

At this point, the Maltese tries to make a run for it toward the villa's park, hoping to barricade himself in the lemon house and from there attempt to overcome the numerical disadvantage.

Scene 2

The Maltese tells the others to run toward the park while he slowly backs away with the Baron. After a moment, the Baron manages to break free with a burst of strength. John starts running after the others and, while fleeing, tries to shoot the Baron but only grazes him.

Garibaldi and the others barricade themselves inside the lemon house. The Baron's *picciotti*, rushing to their leader's aid, advance while firing. Some are killed, but their numbers are large, and they remain the overwhelming majority. When the lemon house is fully under siege, two of the Baron's men arrive carrying a small cannon, still unloaded. The Baron tells the besieged to surrender or they will all die together. The besieged tell him to go to hell. The Baron then orders the small howitzer to be loaded. The *picciotti* begin fumbling with the gunpowder. But while they are still busy with the loading, a trumpet sounds the charge, and in the distance Redshirts appear, on foot and on horseback, pressing against the villa's gate. In gunfights and bayonet clashes, they quickly overpower the sentries. Behind them, having landed from a fishing barge, come the sailors from the Vatican vessel, armed with rifles and furious at having been

excluded from the wedding despite the Baron's promises.

The two artillery *picciotti* are taking too long to light the fuse. The Baron, irritated, snatches the torch from one of them and insists on firing it himself. He lights the fuse, already savoring the explosion and his triumph. But despite the clear sky, a thunderclap tears through the air, and a lightning bolt strikes the howitzer, which suddenly swivels around. It is now aimed directly at the villa, and the fuse is nearly burned through. The *picciotti* and the Baron scramble for cover before the explosion, running toward the building.

With a roar and a violent explosion, the projectile shoots into the air and soon strikes the façade of the main building. The *picciotti* panic as guests — unaware of what has been happening — begin to flee in terror from inside, where they were calmly having breakfast.

The Garibaldians press against the villa's gate while some *picciotti* inside try to hold them back with covering fire. Meanwhile, the besieged open a line of fire to break out of the lemon house, and in a short time the *picciotti* scatter and fall back. There is no trace of the Baron. Suddenly an explosion is heard, followed by the screech of twisted metal, then shouts and gunfire. The Garibaldians have broken through the gate and are entering the property. Garibaldi, covered by Carminati and the Maltese, runs to take command of the assault, while Joe rushes off in search of Frances.

Scene 3

The Baron's *picciotti* are barricaded inside the villa, firing from the rooftops and windows. Fighting rages as bullets whistle in

every direction. A small field cannon brought by the Garibaldians blasts through the villa's main entrance along with the furniture piled against it. Led in the assault by Carminati and the Maltese, the Garibaldians swarm inside, fighting room by room.

In the courtyard, where several bodies of *picciotti* and Garibaldians lie, Joe finds Monroy gravely wounded. He has taken a terrible blow to the head and is losing a great deal of blood. He has been shot at point-blank range, and there seems to be no hope for him. Joe tries to staunch the wound with a handkerchief. Monroy, dying, asks Joe to tell his daughter he is sorry. He has been blind as a father, never realizing that his old friend was in truth a monster with even more monstrous plans in mind. Then he loses consciousness.

The last of the Baron's *picciotti*, overwhelmed by the attackers, surrender. The gunfire dies down and the Garibaldians cheer in victory. From inside the villa, Carminati and the Maltese emerge and walk toward Joe. He asks them to help him carry the wounded man inside. They lift Monroy and lay him on a sofa. Monroy seems to regain consciousness, and Joe asks him about Frances. Monroy stammers, "the Baron... the Baron..." and then exhales his final breath. They understand that the bastard has taken Frances.

The Maltese says the Baron has certainly fled to the port. The Baron always has a plan B to ease his escape. He himself has been tasked with reviewing in detail the one prepared for Castellammare. In the coach house there should be always a carriage ready to depart in case of emergency. The vehicle, drawn by very fast horses, would bolt out of the villa at full speed if attacked. If the main road proves unusable — as in this case — the carriage should take a small carriage road that runs

right behind the villa. It is slower, but it leads straight to the port. There lies the Baron's personal yacht, anchored and ready — a vessel that, in case of emergency, has orders to set sail as quickly as possible. Perhaps he and Frances are still on the road. Joe mounts his horse and launches into pursuit. Carminati and the Maltese exchange a look and decide to go as well.

They meet the carriage about halfway to the port. Two armed *picciotti* sit on the box. One of them — the one not driving — notices they are being pursued and starts firing his rifle at them. Meanwhile, shots are fired back from inside the vehicle. The carriage, having been prepared for emergencies of this kind, is equipped with several options for use during a chase. From the windows, the Baron and Father Corso throw handfuls of caltrops to injure the horses. The pursuers dodge the threat while the *picciotto* on the box keeps shooting.

The road narrows and the carriage is forced to slow down. The Maltese accelerates, careful to avoid the rifle shots. To prevent anyone inside from firing, Joe and Carminati cover the Maltese with pistol fire. The Maltese pulls alongside the carriage and finds himself face-to-face with the rifleman, who immediately aims at his head. The Maltese gives a yank and drags him down, then leaps onto the box. The driver tries to attack him and a struggle breaks out. Suddenly the carriage hits a root, swerves violently, and throws both the Maltese and the driver off.

The carriage hurtles downhill out of control. No one is driving it, and it is approaching a series of hairpin turns that drop into empty space. Frances climbs out from inside and reaches the box to grab the reins, but she is immediately followed by the Baron, who threatens her with a large knife. Frances is forced to drive with a blade pressed to her throat. Joe wants to shoot, but he cannot risk hitting Frances, so he is forced to fall in behind

the carriage. Carminati pulls up beside Joe and says he is going back for reinforcements.

The carriage loses a wheel, bursts into town, scrapes through a few streets in a shower of sparks and splintered wood, and reaches the port half-wrecked.

Scene 4

Joe, before entering the town, slows his pace, fearing that the Baron may have secured his escape route by placing his men to watch the roads leading to the port. It takes Joe very little time to spot several *picciotti* positioned as snipers on the rooftops of nearby houses. So, near the edge of the settlement, he dismounts and chooses an observation point that gives him a clear view of the situation on the docks.

Looking down, he realizes he made the right decision. There is a sailing ship — equipped with a steam engine — moored at the quay. It flies the Sant'Anna flag. The ship is guarded by a small garrison of *picciotti*, and more of them stand around what remains of the carriage. Had he charged in, they would have riddled him with bullets. Joe is too far away to hear what they are saying. The Baron grips Frances tightly by the arm as she struggles. A couple of *picciotti* hold her fast, leaving her no chance to escape.

On the pier, the Baron tells Father Corso to go to his cabin and begin preparing to celebrate the wedding. Then he turns to Frances, announcing with a sneer that that fool Monroy is dead — he killed him personally — and that this marriage will make him heir to the entire fortune. A pity that, even before her father is buried, the Baroness will suffer a tragic accident. But

not before the marriage is consummated. Frances thrashes in fury, but the *picciotti* keep her pinned.

Father Corso climbs aboard the vessel. The Baron orders Frances to be brought on deck, and the *picciotti* drag her onto the ship while she is now frozen in terror. The *picciotti* board right after her, keeping their guns trained on the port square in case the Garibaldians arrive. The snipers from the surrounding rooftops climb aboard as well. The Baron is the last to step onto the ship, wearing a broad, triumphant smile. At that point, the gangway is pulled up, and the sailors begin hoisting the sails and casting off the moorings.

Joe watches helplessly as the scene unfolds, when the Maltese arrives — battered and bruised. They assess the situation together, and Joe is pessimistic. But the Maltese tells him that if they charge at full speed with their horses, they have enough distance and momentum to jump, break through the defenses, and land on deck. Joe says it's madness, but it's the only chance they have to save Frances. After a moment of hesitation — aware of the danger of their wild, desperate attempt — Joe and the Maltese hurl themselves forward at breakneck speed, galloping toward the docks. Someone on the ship spots them and alerts the *picciotti*. A few rifle shots ring out as Joe and the Maltese race closer and closer to the pier.

The ship pulls away from the quay in a hurry, but getting under sail is a slow process. Joe and John, reaching full speed at the edge of the pier, leap — flying through the air with their horses. The *picciotti* try to fire back, but a powerful wind blowing from land jolts the ship, throwing the shooters off balance while at the same time lifting and sustaining the jump the two Garibaldians have just made. It's a two-and-a-half-meter gap, but thanks to the favorable wind, they manage to clear it.

They land with a tremendous crash on the ship's deck, to the disbelief of the *picciotti*. Joe draws his sabre and pistol, and the Maltese pulls out a knife. But they are surrounded. The *picciotti* aim their rifles at them but do not fire. Their leader wants to ask the Baron what to do: kill them or take them prisoner. In that moment, a series of thunderbolts strikes the ship, splitting the mainmast in two and setting the sails ablaze. A rain of splinters and fire crashes onto the deck. The *picciotti* scatter; some throw themselves into the sea, others believe it is the vengeance of Saint Gennaro. Flames spread everywhere, and if the fire reaches the boiler, they will all be blown to pieces.

Joe and the Maltese run below deck. They are about to enter when, opening the door, they come face-to-face with the *picciotti* leader. The Maltese knocks him out with two punches to the face. The two descend, searching for where Frances might have been taken. From the door at the end of the corridor — the Baron's cabin — they hear Latin chanting. They run in that direction but hear hurried footsteps behind them, so they slip into one of the side cabins. It is the *picciotti* leader, rushing to tell the Baron that the ship is on fire and they must abandon it. Father Corso is wearing his stole and reciting Mass. Frances is held by force by the captain, who presses a weapon to her back. The captain is also acting as witness. The Baron urges the Jesuit to hurry the ceremony, but Father Corso replies that he cannot. The *picciotti* leader pressures him, and the Baron orders the Jesuit to stop the rite and commands the captain to perform a quick civil marriage. Joe and the Maltese have no chance to intervene. If they did, a fierce gunfight would erupt and Frances could be hit. The captain, in a matter of seconds, declares them husband and wife, then urges everyone to get out on deck and seek safety.

They step out onto the deck, but it is an inferno of smoke and

fire. Nothing is visible, and the ship is drifting. The *picciotti* leader points out a ladder to the Baron that leads to a lifeboat. He climbs down first, then Father Corso. The Baron is about to hand Frances down when Joe and the Maltese appear on deck, weapons drawn, ordering him to stop. The Baron fires at them, and they take cover. He throws Frances into the lifeboat and climbs down after her. From the lifeboat, the Baron shouts triumphantly that he has won once again. Frances is his wife, and they are about to die on the burning ship. Farewell, fools.

But a cascade of water crashes down on him and across the entire vessel — an intense, continuous downpour that begins to smother the flames and clear the smoke, revealing what is happening all around. The Papal sailors, from their own vessel, are spraying seawater with pumps. The fire is being subdued.

Other boats full of armed Garibaldians surround the Baron's lifeboat, and on the quayside several platoons of Garibaldians stand ready to fire, while others have taken the recovered *picciotti* prisoner. Garibaldi himself leads them. The Baron and Father Corso realize they are surrounded by sea and by land. The lifeboat is boarded, and the two fugitives are disarmed and bound. Frances, once back on the ship, runs into Joe's arms.

Once everyone is back on land, Garibaldi orders them to head immediately to Naples to await the arrival of the Spanish. The Baron and Father Corso will come with them. For the moment, they will be locked in the fortress of Castel dell'Ovo until their fate is decided. According to Bixio, there is no need to wait — a court-martial can be held at once, and they can be sentenced to execution. But Garibaldi urges caution, given the Baron's high rank and the Jesuit's elevated position in the Vatican hierarchy.

Joe tells Garibaldi he will join him in Naples once Frances is safe.

Scene 5

Frances is devastated by the news of her father's death, and Joe repeats to her Monroy's final words. Frances weeps. On top of that, she now finds herself married to the Baron. If the Spanish reach Naples and break through, they will certainly free him, and she will once again become his prisoner. And even if that does not happen, as it often goes with great nobles, the Baron will eventually be released and walk free again. Frances has no escape.

But for now, she wants only to see her father.

Joe and John take her back to the villa. Carminati welcomes them — as administrator, he returned as soon as possible to put things back in order. The wedding guests and their servants are leaving in a hurry. Some have already gone, leaving behind all their luggage. The servants of those who remain, now out of hiding, are packing up what was in the rooms to send it back to its rightful owners. Miss Schmidt runs out of the villa in tears and rushes to embrace Frances. She is overjoyed that her girl has survived.

The Garibaldians are carrying away the wounded and burying the dead. Monroy has been laid outside in the courtyard, set apart from the other bodies. He lies stretched out on a sheet. Frances kneels beside him. She remains silent for a while, tears in her eyes. After some time, she rises and joins Joe, who is speaking with John and Carminati about her future.

When she approaches, Carminati tells her that the best place for her — while waiting to see how things develop — is certainly the castle of Erice. Frances is, in every respect, the Baroness, and therefore she may dispose of the Sant'Anna estate. He will

see to it that the servants and staff obey her as they would the master. John, instead, will take care of her safety. Should things take a turn for the worse, the Maltese will escort her to a safe place.

Frances agrees and asks whether her father's body can be taken to Naples to be embalmed, as is customary in England. The details of the funeral would be decided later. Carminati tells her not to worry. He will take care of everything. He knows Naples well, and the Sant'Anna family have their own employees there. They will do what needs to be done, because these are the Baroness's orders. She and John will return to Sicily on a Monroy ship after Frances has informed the company's central offices of her father's death.

From the villa's rooftop, a Garibaldian shouts something while scanning the horizon with a spyglass. Warships can be seen just beyond the line of the sea. Most likely the Spanish have already arrived. Soon the Iberian soldiers will be ready to land, and Garibaldi, by now, has already reached Naples to face them. Joe must join him. He bids farewell to Frances, promising her they will see each other again soon.

A train whistle echoes in the distance. Joe asks what it is. The Garibaldians have secured the railway, and the train carrying the wounded is ready to depart, heading quickly to the hospital in Naples. Joe runs to catch it. The Maltese goes with him.

Scene 7

Garibaldi is at the port. The two warships are quite close to the coast, yet they do not fire a single cannon shot. And instead of being manned by Garibaldians in full battle readiness,

the coastal defenses are deserted or held by only a few men. Garibaldi, standing on the quay, is speaking amicably with several high-ranking officers. Joe approaches and is stunned to see his father. Garibaldi smiles and tells Joe to look at the flags flying from the ships on the horizon. Incredibly, they are English flags.

London, having learned of Madrid's intervention, sent Styles Senior as commander of an assault brigade to be embarked in Marseille on English ships, with orders to intercept the Spanish, block their advance, and persuade them to withdraw. The Spanish were intercepted just before reaching Naples and, after the English displayed the power of their latest-generation cannons, they were brought to more reasonable intentions. The Spanish ships changed course and headed toward the African coast to carry out anti-piracy operations.

A breathless courier arrives with a dispatch for the general. A Piedmontese army, led by the king himself, is crossing the Papal States and will soon join the Garibaldians, who in the meantime are building trenches and fortifications along the Volturno in preparation for the clash with the Bourbons. The general's presence is required at the front immediately, and Garibaldi knows he can no longer delay. He orders the men to gather for departure.

Near Teano, north of Naples, the Piedmontese army and the Garibaldian army, both marching toward the Volturno, meet. From the head of the two columns, Vittorio Emanuele and Garibaldi ride forward, shake hands, and confer. Then Garibaldi turns toward Joe and calls him over. Joe, on horseback, reaches them.

Garibaldi has told the king about the Baron's schemes and

about Joe's heroic actions, which saved the expedition, Italy, and the Crown. Vittorio Emanuele summons an attendant and whispers an order to him. He draws his sword and knights Joe as a Cavaliere d'Italia. The attendant brings a medal of the order, which Joe fastens to his chest.

Vittorio Emanuele adds that Italy will be grateful to Joe, and therefore he may ask of Italy whatever he wishes. Joe replies that, for the moment, his desire is to fight on the Volturno.

11

Act 11 - Epilogue

Few days later

Vittorio Emanuele, upon arriving in Naples, wants first and foremost to speak with the Baron. The king confronts him in his cell, and the Baron feels no shame in claiming the brilliance of his plan. He mocks the House of Savoy and warns the king that, with him still around, their throne will remain unstable. Vittorio Emanuele is on the verge of ordering his immediate beheading and storms out of the cell, slamming the door. He is about to summon the executioner when he runs into General Styles. The general has an idea that might satisfy His Majesty.

In London, from the very beginning of the rebellion, they have known that the leader of the Taiping in China is Father Corso. And they know that the priest has done what he has done partly because, if he hopes to take Beijing, he needs a competent commander capable of bringing order to that disorganized mass of ragged followers. Garibaldi is no longer available for that

role, but the Baron could replace him. He studied in a military academy and has always commanded soldiers and policemen in Trapani, as well as his own private force of picciotti. He should have no trouble handling the Taiping.

London's plan is to arrange the escape of the two prisoners and send them off to China. The king is astonished. He knows London is preparing to crush the Taiping rebellion, so what sense would it make to return their mastermind, Father Corso, and provide them with a skilled military commander? Styles smiles. After their escape, the two men would be placed—without their knowledge—on a British government ship bound for China, a ship full of Foreign Office personnel. An English agent, infiltrated among the Jesuits and who had provided Styles with valuable information during the Garibaldian campaign, including intelligence on Father Corso, would travel with them.

During the two-month voyage, the agent would subtly lace the Baron's drinks with an opium mixture, enough to make him sensitive to the substance but not intoxicated—otherwise Father Corso would notice. Once dependent, the Baron would, upon arriving in China, be drawn to the first opium den he passed, even just by catching its scent from the doorway. Exhilarated and euphoric, he would lead the Taiping to disaster, making the British army's task far easier. Within a year and a half, if he managed to escape, the Baron would end up a wasted shell in some opium den, forgotten in the slums of a Chinese city.

As for Father Corso, if the emperor laid hands on him, he would face the punishment reserved for rebels: he would be flayed alive, and his skin would become a screen used by the sovereign to shield himself from his eunuchs while attending to his morning bodily needs.

Vittorio Emanuele likes the idea and shakes Styles's hand. The king orders his aide-de-camp to carry out the general's instructions to the letter. The two men take their leave.

That very night, news spreads through Naples that the profaners of the relic of Saint Gennaro are imprisoned in Castel dell'Ovo, and Neapolitans begin gathering outside the fortress with torches, pitchforks, and weapons. The crowd demands that the garrison soldiers hand over the two prisoners. Father Corso and the Baron watch the situation unfold from their cell and are seized with terror. The commander, awaiting reinforcements, harangues the crowd and tells them that there are no inmates in the fortress, that it is only a rumor, a false report.

Meanwhile, a guard opens the cell and tells the prisoners to follow him. He leads them down into the underground level at the waterline, where a small pier and a rowboat await. A rower takes them aboard and carries them out to sea, where they are transferred onto a cargo ship bound for Malta. At the same time, a delegation of agitators is admitted into the castle to verify that the two prisoners are not there. Faced with the empty cell, the commander asks everyone to return home.

In Malta, the two fugitives present themselves at the local Jesuit College, where Father Corso receives the order to return to China. The rector also invites the Baron to go with him and to consider taking command of the Taiping. The Baron has little choice. Anywhere he might go in Europe, there would always be some Neapolitan ready to kill him after the scandal tied to the profanation of the relic of Saint Gennaro. In China, instead,

he would lead a victorious rebel army, take Beijing, and perhaps even be made prime minister of the empire. He decides to go as well. Traveling with them is a French Jesuit who will disembark in Macau.

After their departure, the rector of the College writes a letter to Rome. The Superior General of the Society of Jesus, upon reading it, sends a telegram to the Cardinal of Naples confirming that, given the enormity and audacity of the priest's sacrilegious act, the Society has cast off Father Corso and his Taiping, who will be left to their fate. Then the Jesuit General goes in person to the British consulate to report that, as agreed, the two men have been sent to China. A diplomatic courier departs to deliver the news to General Styles.

Upon returning to Piazza del Gesù, the Jesuit General finds a telegram waiting for him. It is from the Cardinal of Naples, asking what became of the two Chinese men Father Corso had brought with him. As he climbs the stairs to his office, the General mentally prepares the reply to be sent to Naples. The Garibaldians escorting the two Chinese prisoners on the outskirts of the city had been ambushed by hooded bandits dressed in black. They knocked out the soldiers and freed the Chinese, disappearing without a trace. The Neapolitan police suspect they were rescued by members of the Chinese mafia, so that their compatriots would not fall into the hands of Europeans. The soldiers involved in the incident say the bandits' fighting techniques were of an Eastern style. Not in Naples, but in Rome, Genoa, and Venice, there exist well-established Chinese communities; they speak Italian, read the newspapers, and receive information from all over the country. They are very proud of their homeland and do not like to see people of their

ethnicity entangled in legal matters before the courts of white Europeans. They have probably already been sent back to their country by an overland route, the General concludes as he opens the door to his office.

One month later

After winning the Battle of the Volturno and capturing the fortress of Gaeta, Garibaldi, standing before his entire assembled army, thanks his men and dismisses them. Apart from Rome, which is still under the Pope, the rest of Italy is now unified into a single great country. Garibaldi also dismisses Joe, ordering him peremptorily to return to Frances as quickly as possible. For Carminati, who had joined the Garibaldians after Monroy's funeral, the general even has a medal. The two travel back together to Naples and board a ship for Palermo.

When they arrive in Erice, Frances runs toward Joe, embracing and kissing him. She is overjoyed that he is still alive and that he still loves her despite everything that has happened. But to marry, there remains the problem of the Baron. Frances is, officially, still his wife. Joe has an idea. He will write to King Vittorio Emanuele to ask for the return of the favor he is still owed. While they wait for the reply, Frances shows Joe her new plantation of Italian tea.

The answer from Turin takes several months to arrive, but at last a diplomatic packet, delivered to them by the prefect of Trapani, reaches Erice. Inside is a ruling from the High Court of

Turin. The Baron, the court writes, has fled to parts unknown, and no news of him has been received for months. Therefore, the court declares him presumed dead, leaving Frances all her husband's titles and properties and freeing her to marry again.

Overjoyed by the news, Joe and Frances set a date for the wedding and choose a civil ceremony. The officiant would be Garibaldi. The general, contacted by a telegram delivered to the island of Caprera where he has retired to rest, replies that he is honored by the appointment.

Several months later

In May 1861, Erice is celebrating. The Sant'Anna castle is decorated for the festivities, ready to welcome the English and Italian guests who will take part in days of revelry for the wedding: banquets, performances, outings, and excursions. The ceremony, on Carminati's suggestion, will not be held at the castle but on the little island of the Asinelli, just off the beaches of Erice and owned by the Sant'Anna family. On the island there is a lighthouse and a small farmhouse where the first wedding banquet can be held. The Maltese knows that place well. It is where he fought for his life for an entire year.

The guests have all taken their seats. Joe stands with Garibaldi at the center of a flower-covered platform facing the assembly. Frances is escorted to the altar by General Styles—now Lord Styles—and her maid of honor is Miss Shmidt. Witness for both is Count Camillo Benso, prime minister of the newly born Kingdom of Italy.

Garibaldi reads the documents and the ceremonial words until the moment of the exchange of rings. Joe places on Frances's finger the one that belonged to the Bellina, but Frances has no real ring with her—only the one fashioned from the gauntlet's phalanx that Joe had given her. They had agreed to exchange those. But a sudden wave from the sea interrupts the ceremony and sends something metallic crashing loudly against the rocks near the couple. Frances picks it up and recognizes it: it is the twin ring to the Bellina's. Perhaps it is indeed her beloved's own ring. Frances slips it onto Joe's finger. Garibaldi declares them husband and wife, and the two kiss.

As they are kissing, to the astonishment of everyone present, their rings begin to glow, and from them emerge the Bellina and her beloved, who, in the form of ethereal shadows, kiss as well before vanishing upward into the sky. The guests' applause is doubled. In that moment, Joe and Frances understand that the strange meteorological interventions at the villa in Castellamare and at the harbor had been the Bellina's doing. Frances had freed her from her curse, and she had freed Frances from hers. A tear runs down her cheek.

After the ceremony, Lord Styles speaks with the newlyweds. The Queen, given the triumphant outcome of the Garibaldian expedition, has promoted him to Lord and granted him a seat in Parliament. To thank Joe and Frances for the essential help they provided in ensuring the success of the enterprise, the sovereign has awarded Joe the highly exclusive admission to the Order of the Bath, while Frances will be welcomed as a member of the Royal Botanical Society. For her—a woman of character who refused to bow to an unhappy marriage, the kind of woman Queen Victoria admires—the sovereign has reserved a unique

privilege: Monroy tea will be exempt from paying the Suez Strait toll once the canal is completed.

A young Prince Umberto, now an adolescent, represents his father at the ceremony. As a wedding gift, Vittorio Emanuele has granted the couple noble titles: Count of Calatafimi for Joe, because it was there that the Englishman saved Garibaldi, and Marchioness of Castellamare for Frances, because it was there that her father died after doing so much to help the Garibaldians succeed in their mission. Vittorio Emanuele is also grateful to the couple for allowing him the honor of being the first to taste tea produced in Italy, even if still in small quantities. Umberto presents them with a photograph of Vittorio Emanuele sipping their tea.

Joe and Frances then speak with Carminati. Frances has a question for him about the Bellina's book he had left on the bench. Had it really been an oversight? Carminati answers no. He had read that book. As administrator of the Sant'Anna estates, he had access to the library, and he knew from the Baron that the book was off limits to everyone. Curiosity had driven him to open it whenever the master was away. He had also learned that if the curse were ever broken, the Sant'Anna family would fall into disgrace. The Baron had deceived him, and he wanted revenge. That was why, when he sensed that Frances had the right qualities to free the Bellina, he made sure she would find that book. And he had been right.

Frances asks how he managed to avoid being bitten by the viper. Carminati shows the palms of his gloved hands. They are protective gloves and conduct very little heat. With him, the viper had not even woken up. The book is now back in the library.

But the viper has turned to dust, and the pages are fading before one's eyes. Something else has happened in the library as well. The paint on the portrait of the first Baron seems to have melted and warped. And, in the armory, the bull's head now seems to smile.

Joe and Frances offer Carminati not only to remain as administrator of their estates but to become the managing director of Monroy. Carminati would accept, but there is the problem of the arrest warrants still hanging over him. Joe tells him not to worry. In recognition of his merits as a Garibaldian and patriot, Count Cavour has arranged for all outstanding charges to be revoked by the various European chancelleries. Even the Austrians have withdrawn their accusations, because in the massacres he ordered, Messernich had exceeded even the Emperor's commands. Joe's father had also secured for him a pardon from the British Crown.

The Maltese, on that day, takes his leave of everyone — Carminati included. The Milanese is still pained by the loss of John's beloved, but the Maltese tells him not to torment himself. It had been a terrible accident, but one the Baron had used to manipulate them both. They had both been victims. And besides, without the Baron, there would have been no attack at all — an attack carried out solely to settle personal scores. Carminati reveals that he had begun to grow suspicious when, as administrator, he discovered that the apartment supposedly belonging to the Carbonari who were meant to help him escape was actually owned by the Baron. The Baron had cleverly transferred the property to the Church, but a builder who had done some work there, unaware of the change of ownership, had mistakenly come to him to present the bill.

The newlyweds join the conversation. Joe bids farewell to the Maltese, with whom he has shared many moments, and Frances embraces him to thank him for all he has done. Carminati confirms that the money he earned over the years in the Baron's service, along with a generous severance payment, has been deposited in a major Argentine bank. When Garibaldi learned of John's story, he suggested that he leave for South America and offer his services — as administrator and guerrilla fighter — to Anita's family, who need someone to manage and protect their estates. Garibaldi also told him that Anita has some beautiful cousins of marriageable age, and that they would not be indifferent to John's charm. And in South America, land is plentiful and cheap.

Toward sunset, while the guests are boarding the boats to return to the mainland, Garibaldi and Cavour stand together on the lighthouse.

Garibaldi points to a tiny speck on the horizon and tells Cavour that it is the island of Pantelleria. Cavour recalls an anecdote the Minister of the Interior once told him, something he had read in the prefectural reports. In late September 1860, a fishing boat from that island recovered a castaway who was floating half-conscious on pieces of wreckage. He had been at sea for days. They pulled him aboard and brought him to the small hospital run by the nuns on Pantelleria. When he was found, the man was wearing a torn and burned habit. The castaway, a foreigner who spoke a slurred Italian, was in desperate condition: burns and fractures all over his body. But thanks to the nuns' care and his own resilient constitution, he managed to stand on his feet again. He was, however, terribly disfigured. The nuns made him a mask so he could appear in public, and they sewed him

a new habit suited to be worn with the mask. Because he had survived such extreme conditions, the islanders took him for a saint. He went to live in an abandoned hermitage on the island, and people bring him gifts and food offerings in exchange for a blessing or a prayer. The fact remains that his body is swollen and his face monstrous and frightening to behold. He may be a saint, but sanctity, it seems, is earned at a very high price.

Speaking of high prices, Cavour addresses the general with frankness, since they are alone. Garibaldi, for his enterprise, had the financial and military support of England and, in terms of logistics, the backing of the Piedmontese. The Bourbon army was not invincible, and Garibaldi could have defeated it anyway. So why resort to subterfuge, corruption, and Freemasonry to complete the mission? Would it not have been more heroic to win that war on the battlefield?

Garibaldi nods. It is true: in Sicily they had been allowed to act freely, and once they landed on the mainland, the Garibaldians reached Naples firing only a few shots, thanks to bribes, promotions, and secret agreements. But not out of cowardice. Modernity cannot be stopped, and Italy, if it hoped to stand a chance as a modern nation, had to be unified. In short, unification would have happened regardless — whether achieved with lead or with roses. Choosing the latter path saved many human lives that would otherwise have been lost for nothing.

In the meanwhile

Pantelleria. The Hermitage of the Elephant's Arch. Some fishermen's wives bring the masked hermit fish wrapped in newspaper. They have come to ask for a blessing for their husbands, who have gone out to sea for a long fishing expedition. The holy man nods and dismisses the women.

As they step out of the small hermitage, a photograph catches the hermit's eye. It is the front page of the *Corriere di Trapani*, which in bold letters announces the wedding of Joe and Frances, the distinguished guests who attended, and the unfolding of the celebrations. A full-page photograph shows the participants posing for the commemorative picture.

The women freeze when a hoarse, chilling cry — "Styyyyyyyles" — bursts from the hermitage. They do not understand its meaning, but they clutch their shawls tightly around themselves and quicken their pace toward home.

As they descend from the ridge, they cross paths with two friars wearing heavy black habits. The women greet them, and the two monks make the sign of the cross. Their faces are hidden beneath their hoods, but one of the women notices that both of them have almond-shaped eyes.